



**Leading Women podcast**  
**Commonwealth Bank Women in Focus**

**Episode 7: Josephine Sukkar AM, Principal of Buildcorp**

**Hosted by: Shivani Gopal**  
**Interviewee: Josephine Sukkar AM**

**Featuring: Julianne Price, Executive Manager Women in Focus**

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Josephine Sukkar AM, Principal, Buildcorp on staying relevant at the coalface of business while mentoring the next generation of women. Josephine shares an insightful story on service-based leadership and sage advice for women embarking on their own journey.

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**Julianne** [00:00:02] Welcome to Leading Women. Your place to share and celebrate real stories and access the tools and resources to help activate your leadership. Hi, I'm Julianne Price, Executive Manager of CommBank's Women in Focus and Leading Women is just one of the ways we support women at all stages of their business journey. So no matter where you are on your journey, we're here. Enjoy this episode as we redefine the business landscape together.

**Shivani** [00:00:34] Welcome to Leading Women, the place to ignite your leadership and redefine the business landscape. I'm your host, Shivani Gopal, and in today's episode, we chat with one of the most accomplished leaders in the country. Josephine Sukkar AM is the principal of Buildcorp and a professional company director whose 35 years of leadership experience continues to influence and shape the business landscape across commercial, sporting, the arts and the not-for-profit arenas across Australia. Josephine is an accidental leader, who believes in staying relevant at the coalface of business while mentoring the next generation of women, ensuring no one slips through the cracks. Sharing an insightful story about service-based leadership, her sage advice for women embarking on their own journey is to stay visible, be accountable and enjoy the ride. This conversation is sure to enhance your own leadership experience. Josephine, welcome to Leading Women.

**Josephine** [00:01:39] Thank you.

**Shivani** [00:01:39] It's so, so wonderful to have you because, Josephine, you have such an incredible spectrum of leadership. Can you share with us your leadership journey because I know that it's not a linear one.

**Josephine** [00:01:50] It's not a linear one but I did start my professional life training to be a medical research scientist and very quickly found myself in construction where I have stayed for, gosh, over 35 years. I ended up through a series of opportunities that were put in front of me, nothing I particularly sought, ended up in directorship roles for not-for-profit organisations and then listed companies and that's evolved into some other really interesting roles as a director within governments, the private sector, the not-for-profit sector. And I've certainly really enjoyed the journey.

**Shivani** [00:02:27] And such a journey it has been. You genuinely are the sum of all of your experiences from science through to construction, through to directorship. I'm sure you've fused in every little bit of yourself into all of those roles. Let's talk more about that from grassroots and game time to principal and professional company director. You influence and impact across property, construction, finance, sport, the arts, medical research and social services, tell us about the importance of leadership at every level for you in supporting women leaders and staying relevant.

**Josephine** [00:03:05] I never really saw myself as a leader, and I think a lot of people, when they're young, don't necessarily do that. You just get an education, get a job, and try to do your job well. And sometimes people identify leadership qualities in individuals, and some other people just look and feel to be born to

leadership. You see young people on football teams or netball teams that seem to, they sometimes have a gravitas or a carriage that makes them look and feel like a leader straight up. I never felt or saw that in myself. I just wanted to work hard, be able to save up and buy a house and have a family and all the typical things. There was nothing particularly different or unusual I don't think about where I began, but others observed qualities in me, I would say that took me to where I was. So I don't think I've ever necessarily seen myself as a leader. What did happen, though, however, when I found myself in construction, in sport and rugby union in particular, which is the sport that Buildcorp has been involved with for over 30 years, there was an apparent lack of women and I didn't really think about that because back in the mid-eighties that was kind of the case everywhere. We were still advertising jobs in newspapers for women and girls and men and boys. The world was very different. And so in a sport like rugby union or in a profession like construction, it wasn't surprising to me. But once women started to ask questions of me about how I ended up where they were because they didn't feel like they had necessarily felt comfortable in working in sectors like construction or participating in sports like rugby union. Then I became aware of some of the structural barriers to their participation, and that was where I decided to become involved. And I guess, accidentally, I ended up in leadership roles in those too and people observed that.

**Shivani** [00:05:00] Accidentally you ended up in those leadership roles but it wasn't an accident that you propelled other women in leadership roles through your influence, because through the work that you do, you now mentor up to five women a week.

**Josephine** [00:05:14] Yes, that's probably right, the most important ones for me, I would say, are in our own business at Buildcorp because we have a program here, a cadet training program where undergraduates come into Buildcorp. We have an equal number of men and women that enter and they usually are third year, fourth year undergraduates in construction management or civil engineering degrees. And I would argue that in catching up with those and in my case the women I catch up with women cadets a couple of times a year, they actually sharpen my toolbox for to lead well to be a good director, because they're right at the coalface of what it is to be a young person in my sector today. They are at the coalface and seeing things that I'm not seeing and make my decisions with the other leaders in this business here more effective because they're more relevant to this generation we're talking to. And I must admit, I genuinely feel the opportunity I have to be in an executive role or own a business, and to remain at the coalface as a mark of the way I am actually makes me a more effective director. I do know what current rates are for HR consultants. I do know what current costs of steel are and shipping containers. I do know what the current pinch points are in the market economy because I'm living them here at Buildcorp and I do take those learnings and those experiences across with me into construction. So I don't ever really want to be a director for me without keeping myself at the coalface where I am.

**Shivani** [00:06:44] Isn't that so incredible? Keeping us all at the coalface of where you are and so much of that comes back to all of these young cadets that you're actually hiring and you making sure that through your influence, they aren't just physically safe, as you're saying, you know, all of the HR rulebooks that there are and naturally they need to be physically safe. You need to do the hygiene and provide a good workplace for them, but they need to be psychologically safe as well. And so as a result, not only are you spending time with them, but you're also getting so much out of that reverse mentoring that happens as a result. I'm sure there's an incredible story in there somewhere, Josephine.

**Josephine** [00:07:20] There is and also having been a young woman myself on construction sites in 1985, I really wanted to mentor the women cadets one-on-one. My husband takes the young men, and that really is to ensure that no young women are slipping through the cracks for us here at Buildcorp and creating an environment one-on-one where I can ask those hard questions and ask in lots of different ways to ensure that nothing is happening on our construction sites that might make them feel less welcome or not safe. And we know from our experience, my husband, Tony and I that we have been more effective when both of us work together. We are the typical, as we describe ourselves, one plus one makes three. We do look at the world in different ways. We, of course, have a different lens on every situation we're looking at, which is the whole diversity discussion. But, you know, more heads looking at the same situation in a different way will bring better outcomes but with respect to young women in the business and ensuring that we do everything we can to retain them and not lose them on the journey only because our workplace here might not feel safe. I do like to create those one-on-one opportunities for young women to share anything that might be concerning them.

**Shivani** [00:08:37] And Josephine, you spoke about your husband, Tony, you are, of course, a co-owner and principal of your family business Buildcorp with him. But what's incredible and unique to your story is that a family business really means something for you all, for everyone, who works at Buildcorp, can you give us an example of your unique approach of running a family business?

**Josephine** [00:08:58] Not sure if it's unique, but it's certainly our journey, we used to talk about a family business in Buildcorp's case, as a business owned by a family, which is my husband and I. But the one thing that we've always tried to do and we talk more broadly about the Buildcorp family, is ensure that our leaders, when they are developing our people and bringing them along a journey, now sometimes we do have months or days or years where we don't necessarily bring our best selves to work, and that is all of us. If it was my son or daughter and they were having a week or a month where they didn't necessarily put their best foot forward, the very first thing I would do would be to try and understand what the issues are that they might be facing. Ask them if everything in their little world is okay because you don't make your children redundant. You try and understand where they might be best placed in this business and ensure that you've helped them find their natural level. So in treating people like family that's not expecting anybody to come along and work where my husband and I work, you know, as you would in a business that was your own, it's expecting them to treat each other as though they were family and try and delight the way we do in their successes and feel really proud and sit back and watch them come in as cadets and move on to become general managers of very large business units, which has happened here at Buildcorp where we absolutely have had staff who began as undergraduates and ended up leading businesses worth hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue. And that's something that we want everybody to be proud of, especially if they have been part of that leadership journey.

**Shivani** [00:10:32] And I assume that they are so proud of it, too. I think what you just said was so incredible because you don't make your family redundant. We talk so much about authentic leadership, we don't talk enough, I think about human first leadership. And your example of running your company like a family is a shining light on human first leadership and how it's done well because as a result, I believe from our last chat at least, or at last run rate, from what you shared with me, you've got 130 people who've been with you for 25 years, 50 of them have been with you for over 20 years that is just incredible.

**Josephine** [00:11:09] There's a very high retention rate at Buildcorp and you know when you've got the right people. They create the right culture and a business like a construction company, you're at risk if you're not careful of having 40 different subcultures. We operate across the whole Eastern seaboard, so there are three different offices run by three different general managers. Then on construction sites themselves, we have about 40 odd sites at the moment running and each of those sites are like really tight business units, for lack of a better word. They are almost a little business in of themselves. Now, if you imagine there's a \$100 million construction project happening that will often happen over a period of a year, year and a half. And you've got a team that are in the trenches developing themselves as a really good and effective tight unit, and you're at risk of developing subcultures within the business in an organisation like ours, unless you have a very good strong culture where the people protect each other and we work very hard at working with our leaders to ensure that they reflect the values of this business. And it doesn't mean that these values are the right ones, it just means these are ours. So as business owners of a private business, I guess we have an agility, but we also have freedom to say, here are the values of this business. If they align with yours and you think this is somewhere that you would like to work, we'd love to have you here. But they are the things that we are not prepared to flex on, we'll flex on lots of things but not on values and not on process or systems adherence. And being really clear on that, it allows people to look at Buildcorp and look at a job opportunity here and say, that is somewhere that I think I'd really fit or perhaps I'd rather work somewhere else. So when you're very clear with your people as to the expectations and it gives the business owners comfort in unleashing your people, knowing that they are the type of people who will be accountable. Accountable leadership is something that I'm very passionate about, and it can be a little bit scary when you're a business owner in an industry like construction where there are very, very skinny margins when you are giving full authority to somebody and that can be pretty scary, but they're not going to learn and you can't expect them to be responsible for everything without giving them authority to make decisions.

**Shivani** [00:13:24] I had such a strong aha moment, Josephine, as you were sharing that, because we all know the risks of silos in businesses, but you've just highlighted the risk of subcultures in businesses and the

secret to absolving that is by really delving deep and making sure that everyone practises your values, very powerful indeed. Thank you for sharing that.

**Josephine** [00:13:43] Well, you don't want the same. I can tell you our Melbourne team are totally different to our Brisbane team and Sydney is a little bit different again and that's the diversity you want. But there has to be a spine, a very strong spine of the things that matters to any organisation and that's certainly the case here.

**Shivani** [00:13:58] A strong spine of leadership and values, now, Josephine, I need to talk to you about your director's journey because you have had an incredible one. I speak to so many executive women and many of them want to embark on a journey to board positions, which you are an expert at, because when it comes to operating at a board level, you are one of Australia's most active women. You serve on a number of private, public, government and non-for-profit boards. You're the President of Australian Women's Rugby and Chair of Australian Sports Commission. So what's your sage advice for women embarking on a director's journey?

**Josephine** [00:14:34] I think that first and foremost to really understand what it is to be a director and what your responsibility is when you sit around the board table, and a lot of the time is providing counsel, advice, direction to the CEO. So first of all, what experience and qualifications do you have that would actually truly qualify you to give advice that is more experienced and more really valuable to that CEO? So first of all, there is I'd like to be a director, but will I be an effective director on a particular board that I'm looking at? When you're someone like me now and at the moment, there's a number of board roles that we are looking to fill on some of the boards that I'm either rolling off and giving a hand to put some names forward on or being part of a board subcommittee where we are recruiting more people to boards. Yes, we are leaning into more women, but there is no question when you sit down and try and build an effective board, it is really helpful if somebody around that board table has seen a candidate in action and not as a director, but to understand how they operate, how they perform. And certainly a lot of the times where I've been invited onto boards, it's not by people who've seen me in action around the board table. It's them seeing me do committee work. So for example, the very first listed company board I was asked to join was by a chairman, who had seen me from a distance build Buildcorp with my husband and made an assessment as to how effectively he believed I had done that. They were looking for somebody who was able to allocate the appropriate amount of time with sufficient experience, built a business and clearly worked across most parts of that business. And who, in their estimation, and that's a subjective estimation, would be effective and make a difference. So and the other not-for-profit or the very first board I was invited to join, I was just a committee member on a fundraising dinner committee where the CEO of the organisation watched me in action. And that particular event, we managed to raise a lot of money and watched the way that I worked and approached me and said, I'd love you to consider joining the board. It was the YWCA. And my first response to her was, I've never been a director. I don't think I'd know how to do that. And she asked me something like, how do you think most directors start? Their first board is going to be something that they've never done before, so it was really good holding the mirror up, and of course the minute I got there, I realised that yes, this is somewhere I can probably make an impact on and I know what I need to do here, to do my job well.

**Shivani** [00:17:14] Josephine, you've spoken about being visible, which is so important when you're being recognised as a leader and then being plucked up to become a director or to become a board member. But at the same time, so many women spend their time in the trenches getting good at what they do that they're not seen for their own brilliance. So how do you maximise your visibility?

**Josephine** [00:17:35] Interestingly, a style thing, so I had around me all the time, as we were building and growing Buildcorp, lots of role models, even on construction sites. Some of those role models were subcontractors, people who have a style and a way of leading that I felt I'd like to work more with that particular individual or one day lead the way that particular man or woman is leading, in my case usually men in those days but had a quality or something in them that made me feel that they would be collegiate and wanting to drag everybody up with them because we all know what is the most important thing leaders do is create other leaders. And if that's your focus as a leader, we know you're doing a good job that's really apparent when you are running a business like ours. The most outstanding leaders in our business are busy building leaders around them. And we know that because we see, you know, young candidates come into the organisation. Next thing you know, they're leading large construction sites. There is someone directly responsible for that, and that's the person they're reporting to. So if you're desperate to develop your own

leadership journey without looking to what you're delivering and doing for those around you, you're probably not going to be as effective, what's that saying, it's around service- if service is beneath you, leadership is beyond you.

**Shivani** [00:18:55] If service is beneath you, leadership is beyond you.

**Josephine** [00:18:59] So what does that mean in practice? That means I have a young contract administrator on a construction site, who might be struggling a little bit in their role. And so as a leader, I sit alongside them and I'm doing more than my technical job would require me to do. Just sit down and have a cup of coffee, understand what's happening with that young individual and help them achieve what they need to achieve to become the professional they want to be and to the level that they are naturally going to land at. And it becomes really apparent when all of a sudden a leader has got four or five leaders sitting beneath them that are very strong and at a disproportionate number to other leaders within a business. And you say, okay, there's something going on here, I wonder what it is. When you have a look at it, they're usually people who are going above and beyond the leadership journey. We have a gentleman in our business who runs a joinery shop for us. He's actually a part owner in this joinery business with us, Euroline. He's a joiner by profession. When Tony and I go out to the factory occasionally to catch up with him, and often he invites us to have a barbecue breakfast with the team. I'll never forget about three years ago we arrived at quarter to seven in the morning on a blistering hot Sydney day. Our factory is at Auburn, which is for those who aren't in Sydney, it is west of Sydney, it honestly must have been up 38 degrees, you know, before 7:00. And he's out standing on a concrete slab with a little semi tent over him, cooking the barbecue himself, buttering the rolls and getting everybody ready to have this barbecue and come out and have it from the factory and come and have a barbecue with Tony and I. And I watched him and as we pulled up, the sweat was pouring from him and he just wanted everything to be just right. And he made the barbecue. He fed everybody. In short, Tony and I were fed and as we were watching the eggs diminish and bacon roll away, we looked at him and said, where's yours? No, no, I'm fine. If service is beneath you, leadership is beyond you that man has people that want to work for him, follow him and he's built a business that turned over a few million dollars to a multimillion-dollar joinery business that works for large Tier 1 builders. And it's an extraordinary business, humble, modest, but an extraordinary leader.

**Shivani** [00:21:25] I think what you've just touched on really reminds me of another conversation, Josephine, that you and I had, which was about your take on the identity of leadership, because you clearly see in leadership as an act of service. And, you know, following on from that, it is so refreshing because from our last chat you were saying to me, Shivani, I don't even see myself as a leader. Tell me more about that.

**Josephine** [00:21:48] Leadership assumes people want to follow you and nobody can make somebody follow them. I can make somebody a manager tomorrow. I can't make them a leader, that's going to require other people to want to follow in that. But what you can do is step into any role and lead. And so that might be leading a conversation, getting into the trenches and leading a movement. In my case, it was trying to understand what was happening to women in rugby or in construction, or setting up a business, leading a family, being a mother. All of the things that encompassed leaders, you know, leaders are all around us, everybody is required to lead at some stage, including leading ourselves, but to be described as a leader, I think a genuine leader that's something others probably need to bestow on us because we can't make people follow us.

**Shivani** [00:22:42] And Josephine, does some of that have to do with your realisations of your roots, where your parents were born that intergenerational impact that it's had on you and the accountability or the growth that you want to have from there.

**Josephine** [00:22:56] The crux of it for me is being accountable for your life and where you end up when you live in a country like Australia. My parents were born in Lebanon and the opportunities here in this country to step up to wherever you'd need to or want to be are a much easier journey than for citizens of other nations, including where my parents and grandparents were born. If you're prepared to step into a role and be accountable for the outcome of it, even if you're not a leader, now, if I'm stacking shelves and I missed my target or whatever I was supposed to do and I keep myself and hold myself accountable to that, eventually somebody is going to ask me to step into a leadership role. I think in a country like this one, the road to leadership is very different and arguably a lot easier than for other nations. So I think when I have these

discussions in Australia, I don't know that that's the case all around the world. But gosh, you know, when I began my married life I was working three jobs, my husband was working two, we were very driven and ambitious. But in a country like this one, you can really set yourself up if you're prepared to step into hard work. We, of course, were visible to the broader community because we just worked very hard and people saw us working wherever we were, saw us socially and a bit at a time. Those messages get out and all of a sudden good luck comes your way. But what do they say about luck, about preparation meets opportunity, we were just going about doing our work, minding our own business, trying to run a construction company, and these other things came our way, which had been a genuine blessing.

**Shivani** [00:24:35] It's a beautiful way to surmise your story, Josephine. I've got one more question for you. At Leading Women, we are committed to activating women's leadership. I'd love to know what tool has ignited your leadership that you can share with us for the Leadership Toolbox.

**Josephine** [00:24:51] In a world that moves very fast today, when I look back over my leadership journey, I suppose, as you describe it. I wasn't in a hurry to be a leader. I wasn't in a rush to be at the top of the pile or top of the tree. I recognised when I had skills to do a job and when I didn't. And I didn't expect anybody to cover me and support me with decisions I made personally, I've taken and I will continue to take absolute accountability for where I am on my personal and professional journey. And in doing that, my experience has been that people noticed that and come to support me. Now those women who are looking to be placed into senior leadership roles, what I will say to them is ensure that search firms and people in your network understand that those are your aspirations. Be very clear and ask for feedback as to how they might perceive you on your journey and where there may be some opportunities for you to work on, if that is indeed the case and lean into those. But to slow down and enjoy the journey and develop really deep skills so that one day someone might tap you on the shoulder and say, come on here, but slow down and enjoy it. When I look back now I'm 60 next year and I look back over that period of time, I allowed myself the permission, I gave myself to go on this journey. Well, I had six years off to raise my children. I worked part time until they went off to college at university. And the time does march by really quickly when I look back at my life and say, "Did I spend the time I wanted to where I should have spent it in my, to make me feel like I've "had it all?" And my answer is yes, I spent my time with my children and I wanted to because that was important to me. Put my family at the heart of everything that I did and I gave my time to develop work skills. So I would encourage any woman hoping to one day step into a leadership role similar to this, to give themselves time, be kind to themselves, and take it slowly if they're able to.

**Shivani** [00:26:59] Slow down, be kind to yourself and take it slowly. Advice we so very rarely hear and yet so very much needed. Josephine Sukkar, thank you so much for joining us at Leading Women.

**Josephine** [00:27:10] It's a pleasure.

**Julienne** [00:27:11] Thanks for listening to Leading Women, where we can all activate and redefine the business landscape. So now it's over to you, access the links, tips and tools discussed in this episode at [womeninfoocus.com.au](http://womeninfoocus.com.au) and subscribe to Leading Women so you don't miss an episode. Leave a review, spread the word and let's commit to keeping the conversation going at [#leadingwomenaus](https://twitter.com/leadingwomenaus)

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