



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

**Episode 7: Shelley Reys AO, CEO, Arrilla Indigenous Consulting,
Partner and Board Member, KPMG Australia**

**Hosted by: Shivani Gopal
Interviewee: Shelley Reys AO**

Featuring: Julienne Price, Executive Manager Women in Focus

Shelley Reys AO, CEO, Arrilla Indigenous Consulting, Partner and Board Member, KPMG Australia on driving change and leaving a legacy driven by her vision to create a culturally inclusive Australia, one workplace at a time. Shelley insists that diversity is not simply challenging the status quo, it is about having more informed discussions leading to making more informed decisions.

Julienne [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 Julienne 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. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander listeners are advised this podcast may contain conversations about deceased persons. Discretion is advised.

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 an impactful leader, creating a lasting legacy by inspiring new, courageous conversations of national importance. Shelley Reys AO is a Djirribul woman of Far North Queensland, a respected Indigenous specialist, strategist and service provider. As CEO of Arrilla Indigenous Consulting, Partner and Board Member at KPMG Australia and Board Member of the Organising Committee for Olympic Games, Brisbane 2032, Shelley is driving change and leaving a legacy driven by her vision to create a culturally competent Australia one workplace at a time. Shelley insists delivering diversity is not simply challenging the status quo, it's about having more informed discussions leading to making more informed decisions. Finally, Shelley shares that for us to be true allies in reconciliation, we need to be leaders who are curious and have courageous conversations. We need to learn more about our shared history and remove the eggshells for ourselves and others so that we can all confidently play our part. Shelley Reys, welcome to Leading Women. It is so wonderful to have you here.

Shelley [00:02:12] Thanks, Shivani. Nice to be with you.

Shivani [00:02:14] Fabulous and Shelley, where are you joining us from today?

Shelley [00:02:17] I'm on Gadigal land, which is in the CBD and surrounding suburbs of Sydney, but my traditional lands are from northern Queensland Djirribul country. So I'm a long way from home right now.

Shivani [00:02:29] You are indeed, a great journey that we're soon going to learn about and I'm looking forward to it. I, too, am coming to you from Gadigal land. Shelley, we've got so much to talk about because you've had an incredible leadership journey. But I want to start right at the very beginning. Where did that spark come from that ignited your leadership journey?

Shelley [00:02:49] I was very young at the time and grew up in a family that had a father in particular who was known for being very kind and inclusive and while softly spoken, was a terrific leader and I learnt lots of things from him as well as my mother. And later on in life, I had the chance to work with my cousin Darren, who was a few years my senior, and he was the one who sparked my interest and gave me this beautiful safe platform, if you like, for working in the First Nations space. And coming from a family of mixed heritage and proud Aboriginal heritage, it seemed like a real gift to me and I was curious and excited, scared, all of those

things, all at the same time. I was very young at the time. I'm guessing around 25, 24 so I was really cutting my teeth on the topic at the same time as exploring what was possible.

Shivani [00:03:53] So your leadership journey started so close to home. It sparked that curiosity and you were 24, 25 at the time that started your journey of diversity and representing diversity in the Indigenous space here in Australia. What did that first step look like for you?

Shelley [00:04:10] Well, as I said, I found it scary, but I was also excited by it. But it was a safe entry point because it was my cousin who was taking me by the hand and showing me a whole range of things that he had already begun to do, begun to think about. And so it was a bit of an exploration beside him. We had a great relationship too, my cousin and I, Darren was his name. And so there was just absolute joy actually just working with him. To be honest, we got along really well. We were great friends as well as close family members, and we socialised together. As much as we worked together, we were quite inseparable actually, and so it was a really interesting journey. I moved from Melbourne to Sydney to do that with him. And what I didn't know at the time that he did know at the time is that he was dying. And so that enthusiasm and that excitement and that feeling of safety, I guess, in those early stages changed pretty quickly when I found out that his life was finite.

Shivani [00:05:13] Shelley, I'm so sorry to hear that. And I think that sets such perspective on the need to do important work and the need to leave a legacy. And I definitely want to talk to you about legacy. Before I do, though, I want to chat about the nature of diversity and the part that you have so defiantly forged. Shelley, one of the things that I really admired about you when you and I had a chat last week was when you talked about the need for diversity in diversity. Can you tell me a little bit more about that and why that really matters?

Shelley [00:05:47] Well, I think diversity, equity, inclusion, those kind of words are bandied around all over the place. And I'm very pleased about that. And when we think about diversity, we often think about black and white and certainly in the context in which I work. But I feel that what's missing is all of the colours in between, if you want to put it that way. I feel like diversity means a range of things. And just because you are a person of colour doesn't mean that the challenges and the insights, the opportunities, the kind of biases that exist are the same for you as they might be to another person of colour. So let's just look at women and diversity, for example. You put another layer of that being an Aboriginal woman. There's obviously a whole other layer again of discrimination and challenges. But then you add that being a woman and just another woman of colour, not necessarily Aboriginal, she's going to be having her own challenges and facing some unique situations of bias in the workplace and outside of the workplace that are different to that Aboriginal person. So it's just I guess what I'm saying is just because you're different colour doesn't mean you're going to be up against the same kind of challenges. And I think that's really important to remember.

Shivani [00:07:11] It's so true and it's so important that someone stands up there and challenges that notion that there is no one size fits all strategy when it comes to diversity. You know, as a woman of colour to another, I very rarely find myself sitting on a boardroom table with other diverse women or other diverse people altogether, because it's almost as though, well, we've got one Indian woman here, and so therefore we ticked the diversity box. And you are certainly challenging that. But how do you move into a space of being uncomfortable, making other people uncomfortable to be a catalyst for change? What's your advice on that?

Shelley [00:07:47] I don't know of a single woman, who might classify herself as a leader, who hasn't been face on with terror. I think there's a lot of things that I do and that other people do in this space that's really scary. I know for myself, I'm talking to people about things that hold me together, that cultural issues about educating people, about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures, teaching people about our shared history, teaching people about unconscious bias and racism. These are not easy conversations to have. And so I'm well aware that in choosing to lead in this space, I am also choosing to be in a room of people that aren't necessarily my allies and advocates. And so it's a very delicate conversation but it does take a lot of courage. As I said in the first instance, there's a multitude of women out there, who are also leaders, who lead with absolute courage. And I'm just lucky to be surrounded by some of them and to witness them and to hear them, to watch them. And I think that it's really important to have role models that are not necessarily accessible but can teach us something about how we might face those kind of obstacles with a sense of courage and being brave, whatever brave means to you.

Shivani [00:09:02] And let's double down on that, you know, the importance of role models and the importance of courage. We know that a great role model for many of us is Brene Brown. And she talks about the importance of vulnerability. And in order to move into a vulnerable space, one must practise courage. And as diverse leaders, I think we all have to be open to being vulnerable, to being the only one out there in order to lead, in order to encourage other women of colour, other people of colour to join forth. How do you practise vulnerability in your leadership, Shelley?

Shelley [00:09:36] As I said, I really feel as though I've learnt a lot by the other women around me. I think I've also learnt a lot from my own family, who are and have been incredibly courageous. All of these lessons in life, all these life experiences and cultural experiences and professional experiences, all go towards helping you learn something new. I would refute the fact that a leader knows everything and no longer learns. I think we all continue to learn and I'm very grateful to those people around me that have been generous enough to teach me so many things from being a very young girl in my mid-twenties, sitting in the dust with elders, having them talk to me about their views about reconciliation, their views about the Stolen Generation, their views about healing. I mean, those people had brave conversations with me. Those people extended a hand of courageousness, and they really led the way for me. All of those people who have been willing to make themselves vulnerable in order for others to learn has been quite the catalyst for me and a really important part in making and shaping my thinking and my actions.

Shivani [00:10:50] Shelley, I'm so glad to hear that you've had people who've been the courageous catalysts of change for you. You no doubt have been the courageous catalyst for change for others because you call out things, as they should be. The more common sense approach for review, you, in fact have recently done a TED Talk where you talk about the need to do a genuine acknowledgement of country and not one just for the sake of it. Please share more about that.

Shelley [00:11:14] To be honest, I've been surprised at how popular this has been. There's been over 80,000 views of this video, it was only released earlier this year. But it just goes to show you how many people feel uneasy about delivering an acknowledgement of country but do want to do it and want to do it with meaning. And that's why I did the TED Talk. I felt as though the reason for creating an acknowledgement of country have been lost because people were so afraid of saying and doing the wrong thing. And I think that in being fearful of saying and doing the wrong thing, you end up walking on eggshells. And when you walk on eggshells, you can deliver an acknowledgement of country that is static, which is often downloaded from some internet site, printed out and read out over and over again. And eventually when you hear enough of those kind of acknowledgments of country, it starts to sound repetitive. It loses its meaning. It loses its personality, almost sounding robotic. And then before you know it, you've got hundreds and thousands of people around Australia delivering acknowledgment of the country with the exact same words, with the exact same sentiment. And so for me, while I appreciate the symbolic acts that people are attempting to do and the reasons for it, I do feel as though it's a missed opportunity, and the missed opportunity is making it meaningful and personal to you. And so my TEDx is about showing people how to make it meaningful and personal and delivering something that's really, truly meaningful. And as I said, I've been overwhelmed by the public response, and I'm so pleased that it's inspired other people to give it a go, but also to make an impact for.

Shivani [00:13:06] Where are you hoping this leads in a country like Australia, where we have yet much to go when it comes to the genuine acknowledgement and embracing the Indigenous people of our land?

Shelley [00:13:18] Well, I think acknowledgement of country is just one example of doing that. Back in the 90s, we were talking about the importance of land and sea to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the notion of an acknowledgement a country came about to give non-Indigenous people something to do and say so that they could also acknowledge country, even though they aren't traditional owners and First Nations peoples. So I think it's terrific that people are thinking about that. And now in the back of my TEDx, I hope making it really meaningful. But it is just one thing of many things that people could be doing if they want to be a true ally for reconciliation, particularly if they want to be a leader and ally for reconciliation. It is a symbolic act and I'm a fan of symbolic acts. The apology to the Stolen Generations was also a symbolic act. The new Prime Minister having the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flag alongside the Australian flag at

the press conference just recently, again, just a symbolic act, but very powerful. But it's really important to do a whole range of other things that are very practical, that bring reconciliation to life in everybody's day to day.

Shivani [00:14:23] How do you bring that all together in your leadership style?

Shelley [00:14:28] Well, I have a very well-worn theory, and I've built a business on it over the last 30 years, and I alluded to it just before, this nervousness that people have around this topic. I think that if you talk about First Nations people or reconciliation, Indigenous people, Torres Strait Islander people or reconciliation action plans, use any of those terms and there's really good natured, amazing people, particularly leaders, who start to get nervous. They're afraid of saying the wrong thing or doing the wrong thing, making a mistake, sounding racist, and they start to walk on those eggshells. So the way that I describe my work is I remove the eggshells and I give people skills as well as confidence to be able to work in this space better. And I generally start with leaders of an organisation, and then we work through the entire workforce. And that is a reflection of my work in the reconciliation space too, around educating the Australian community so that this topic is no longer elusive and scary, but instead something that's accessible and something that people can confidently contribute to. So having more informed discussions on the topic, making more informed decisions on this topic, you know, if I was to leave a legacy at some time that would be my wish.

Shivani [00:15:43] Shelley, one of the things that you do really well is that you have such clarity of purpose and self-awareness, which you use to manage the blindspots of others. Can you tell us how you do that?

Shelley [00:15:54] It's interesting, Shivani, because I get a lot of people asking me to provide comment on First Nations peoples and it might be on the topic of health, housing, law, justice, employment, education, unconscious bias, racism. The list goes on but because it's all black matters, First Nations matters, they think that I'm an expert on all of those matters, and I'm not and I don't pretend to be and I never could be. There are many people who specialise in many of those areas, and I'm not one of them. And so I first of all, start talking to people about their own biases and explaining that just because I'm Aboriginal and just because I specialise in that space doesn't mean that I'm a specialty speaker or thinker on some of those topics. And it's a really important conversation to have with people. It's like asking a woman about her view about women's rights, and she may very well have a view about women's politics. But the overall rights agenda is something she's completely uncomfortable with because it's not her area of expertise. Just because she's a woman doesn't mean that she knows everything about or happened to talk about everything related to that topic. So I just feel that that's a bit of a furphy to think that everyone should be a leader on every aspect of being Aboriginal, for example. And I think there's a lot of pressure on people to do that. So I will talk about my area of expertise is around racism and unconscious bias. It's around education, it's around leadership, reconciliation, just to name a few. But I won't talk about things like youth suicide. I won't discuss matters of health and diabetes and heart failure, and the list goes on. They're not my areas of expertise just because I'm a First Nations person.

Shivani [00:17:47] Yes and yet there you are challenging the need for diversity within diversity. The fact that just because you are an Indigenous woman doesn't mean that you are an expert across all areas. And it starts to challenge this notion of we need more seats at the table when it comes to voices and representation.

Shelley [00:18:06] I think we do. I think in terms of First Nations peoples, we're seeing more leadership and more leadership opportunities. We're seeing more Aboriginal people at board tables and in senior management. But I would like to see much more diversity and it's quite unheard of to have two Aboriginal people on the board. For example, Shivani, similar to your story and your Indian culture, you'll often only see one person of Indian background being represented, we've ticked that box and off we go. So it was a delight for me to be appointed by the Prime Minister to the Organising Committee for the Olympic Games and to find that there were two appointments of people with an Aboriginal background because you just very rarely see that.

Shivani [00:18:50] And let's talk more about that, please, can you share, you know, your insights of the 2032 Olympic Games and how you feel that might be a catalyst for diversity in the future?

Shelley [00:19:01] Well that's exactly what I'm excited about, it is one of the reasons why I accepted the role, Shivani. It's a real opportunity where an unusual board that we have ten years of planning. So the Brisbane

Olympic Games will be 2032 and it's the longest lead-time that any board has had for any Olympic Games in history. And so I like to think that we can use those ten years to our advantage and I'd like to think that I can inject some of my nation building style and work into the work of the Olympic Committee. I'm passionate about nation building styled work, whether it's the apology to the Stolen Generations, whether it's my work on Reconciliation Australia, the development of reconciliation action plans, the Voice to Parliament matter, which is the hottest topics for First Nations people and reconciliation at the moment. I hope what I can do is help Australia and Brisbane celebrate all the great things about being Australian, including our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander brothers and sisters who are the caretakers and First Nations people of our country. It's a moment of celebration and real pride and there's nothing like sport, I think, to bring people together. Australians love doing that, but it's such a great opportunity, I think, to build a sense of pride and celebration around the Olympic Games. And it's my hope that First Nations people are a central part of that celebration.

Shivani [00:20:36] And it sounds like and certainly feels like it will be, you know, sport traverses so many age groups, cultures, genders. And not only do we want to have representation in sport, but also representation and leadership. And of course, we're seeing that through and through so that is phenomenal. So let's step to the future then, Shelley, you've accomplished so much already. You've got a long way to go, though in the bigger scheme of things, I can just feel it. What's next in the world for Shelley Reys?

Shelley [00:21:08] And that is a great question, I don't really know, to be honest. I do want to do, I guess, one thing, and that is to continue to help leaders understand what role they can play to be an ally in the reconciliation movement because so many leaders, I think, underestimate the power of leadership and their personal power to change the lives of First Nations peoples and to change the hearts and minds of non-Indigenous peoples, who are under their leadership. And so I hope to continue to do that in a way that makes sense for people and in a way that builds curiosity and interest and again, pride. And I do hope that the end result of that, by the time I drop off this mortal coil is if we're really thinking about legacy, is that I've created an environment where Australians can have more informed discussions on this topic and make more informed decisions on this topic. And with doing that, they'll be in a better position to partner with First Nations peoples and us to really achieve this thing called reconciliation.

Shivani [00:22:20] That just gave me a massive aha moment, more informed discussions leads to more informed decisions, what salient advice, Shelley. Shelley at Leading Women, we're committed to activating women's leadership. What tool has ignited your leadership that you can share with us for the Leadership Toolbox?

Shelley [00:22:39] I would suggest that in thinking about one's leadership and how you can be a leader for reconciliation, it's important to, first of all, remove those eggshells, important to educate yourself. Learn about First Nations peoples, about First Nations culture, about our shared history and in learning about those things, you'll be able to understand why you're involved in this space, what the business case that sits behind it, for example. You'll be able to articulate why you're involved in this space to shareholders, to partners, to your teams. And the other thing I'd recommend is that people remove the eggshells for others, so don't limit the education to yourself, share it with other people. Think about how can we educate our teams and the people around us so they too can be playing their part and be confident to do that. And I recommend having those courageous conversations that we alluded to earlier. It's so important and I've learnt so much from other courageous people to be willing and able to expose yourself just a little bit, to have those brave conversations because unless we're willing to have the brave conversations about race, about racism, about systemic racism, then we're not going to shift the dial. We're just going to move on the periphery. And I know that that's difficult to do and sometimes if you're thinking that sparking those kind of brave conversations means that you will lose your constituents, you'll lose favour with your colleagues, with those around you that all makes perfect sense to me and those fears are real. And so it does take a lot of bravery to have these difficult conversations. But as I said before today to be a true ally of reconciliation, we really need to, we need to do that. And so the courageousness that I saw that was gifted to me as a young person and has throughout my whole career, I hope that others will mimic so that we can shift that dial. And as I said before, I think it's really important for leaders to understand that they have a role to play and understand the power of their influence, their leadership and their influence to really change hearts and minds and actions.

Shivani [00:24:57] I love that, get curious, educate yourself, think about why, stop stepping on those eggshells and have courage. Shelley Reys, thank you so much for joining us on Leading Women.

Shelley [00:25:08] It's a pleasure. It was fun. Thank you.

Julienne [00:25:12] 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 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 [#leadingwomensaus](https://twitter.com/leadingwomensaus)

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