



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

**Episode 2: Alisi Tutuila, Founder and Managing Director of Aspire Indigenous and Chairperson of Aboriginal Housing Company**

**Hosted by: Shivani Gopal  
Interviewee: Alisi Tutuila**

**Featuring: Julienne Price, Executive Manager Women in Focus and  
Simone Kenmore, Executive Manager, Indigenous Business Banking**

---

Alisi Tutuila, CEO Aspire Indigenous, and Chair, Aboriginal Housing Company on fulfilling her deep sense of responsibility with honour, giving back whilst paying it forward and changing the trajectory for Indigenous youth through building infrastructure across housing, recruitment and childcare.

---

**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.

**Simone Kenmore** [00:00:33] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander listeners are advised this podcast may contain conversations about deceased persons. Discretion is advised.

**Shivani** [00:00:42] Welcome to Leading Women, where we support your leadership journey. I'm your host, Shivani Gopal, and today's episode is a deeply transformative yarn, with a woman driving change from the inside out by harnessing the power of communication with community. Alisi Tutuila is the founder and Managing Director of Aspire Indigenous and Chairperson of Aboriginal Housing Company, whose leadership was sparked at an early age, fulfilling her deep sense of responsibility with honour giving back whilst paying it forward. As a mom of two, her impact and legacy will change the trajectory for Indigenous youth through building infrastructure across housing, recruitment and childcare, driving one unrelenting purpose by wearing many big hats. Alisi shares her moment of realisation, I am meant to be here, this is my time because if not now, then when. And she offers this sage advice, find your people, communicate with your community and trust your champions. Alisi, welcome to Leading Women, it's such a pleasure to have you here in studio with us today.

**Alisi** [00:02:05] Thank you so much, Shivani, I'm so excited to be here and I can't wait to be a part of this conversation.

**Shivani** [00:02:10] Neither can I and of course, we're together here on Gadigal land. I'd love to hear a little bit more about what that means for you.

**Alisi** [00:02:19] I'm so humbled and blessed to be able to acknowledge that we are on Gadigal land, the land of the Eora people, and just want to pay my respects to elders both past and present, and acknowledge the emerging leaders as well, and just everyone else in the room present today, thank you.

**Shivani** [00:02:34] What an honour to have you do that and I want to talk about so much in particular, your leadership journey that is just so unique and inspiring, Alisi. Can you share with us how your leadership has sparked through your own experiences and that path to here?

**Alisi** [00:02:52] Yes, of course, when I looked at this question, I thought, I'll give you two quick, brief snapshots. So one personally at the age of four and a half, five, I think my leadership journey started then, I was raised by a single father. And I remember the day he said to me, very limited English speaking

background as well, he's Tongan. He said, Alisi, I'm going to need your help. You're going to need to step up a little bit because it's only me and your little sister. So I just need your help in a lot of things. And I think at that moment I realised that there was a lot of expectation on me. And so as much as it was scary, I think I graduated to my big girl pants that day. And ever since that day, I think my younger sister began to maybe despise me a little bit because I was the older, bossy, you know, little big sister mum. But I really did, I think at a very young age, take that leadership responsibility really to step up and be that second mum for my younger siblings and also, you know, contributed to my father speaking very well English he does today because I would read him Dreamtime stories and that's how I taught him how to speak English. Professionally, I'd say about 20 years ago, one of my first big roles was an Aboriginal drug and alcohol youth worker in Redfern with the Redfern Waterloo Street team and that really sparked my leadership journey because at a young age, even I was a teenager working with teenagers in community. I learned at a very young age that these young people just needed someone to be able to rely on, someone to trust, someone to be able to guide them. And so being in that space that I was in, I was able to really build that rapport and respect in community. But also I was able to understand at a very young age, despite me probably missing a lot of my teenage years, that I had a bigger purpose ahead of me and that's what really drove me.

**Shivani** [00:04:39] You really did have a bigger purpose and unlike so many of us, you stepped into that purpose-based leadership at such a young age. I couldn't imagine that level of responsibility being thrust upon you, but of course, fulfilling that level of responsibility, not just with duty, but with just so much honour and a sense of giving back to your sister and your father and then paying it forward to your community. I think a lot about purpose when I think about your leadership journey, because in your journey you've had this one sense of underlying purpose that has really driven you through, despite the fact that you've had to wear many hats to keep you focused.

**Alisi** [00:05:23] When I actually looked at the theme many hats, one purpose, it really was an opportunity for me to reflect. I had never really sat and reflected on that question until I've seen this. You know, looking at that question, I thought, okay, what are the many hats that I wear? So I've been with the Aboriginal Housing Company as their chairperson for the last 13 years, particularly working in an executive capacity to develop now what we know as Redfern, the Block, which consists of 62 Aboriginal affordable housing as well as a childcare centre, commercial precincts, as well as a health and fitness centre, an arts and cultural centre. And we also have on the other side of us 24 stories of 600-bed student accommodation with 110 dedicated to Aboriginal students. So that's been a big part of the leadership, a big hat, I guess that I've chosen to wear and I wear quite proudly. The other one would be my capacity with Aspire Indigenous, I'm the managing director and founder of that, which is a recruitment assessment and training team, very proud that I've been able to be involved in this space and outside of, I guess, the commercial impact that's had on my own personal life and benefits, just having the influence to really impact in the Indigenous space, particularly around procurement and policy, on how the government interacts with Indigenous businesses in contracts and tenders and increasing the number of particularly of women in the workplace in the construction industry. I'm really passionate about that. We're working at the moment on a she-tradie program with a couple of community providers and we're really excited to keep, I guess challenging particularly the construction industry on what they label as non-traditional roles and really try and break into those spaces for our women that are really keen to be leading in the concrete space so that, you know, the engineer space or the steel fixing space, spaces where, you don't traditionally see women so I'm excited about that. I'm also the chairperson for the Yenu Allowah Aboriginal Child and Family Centre, which I have been on the board for now, for the last three years, extremely passionate about this space because for me a big part of my purpose is really cultivating the environments that we operate in for our next generation and being involved in a platform where I get to work directly in impact the learning environments for our babies that's such a big thing for me. Strategically, where the biggest Aboriginal child and family centre in the state, we're an exceeding level, the only one, which I'm very proud of. I remember we just had our AGM and one of the funding providers said, I hope, you know, we really hope Alisi that you guys can maintain your exceeding standard. I said, we're not going to maintain it, we're going to exceed it, we're going for excellence. I'm pretty excited about that space and the reason I'm super excited about that space is everything I've done to the past has really been focused on the development capacity of our younger generation, particularly around social and affordable housing, with the student accommodation on the Block, with the recruitment of, you know, people going into the workforce. And I've kind of did now that 180 almost that 360 going now into childcare and really having that influence on our baby's journey. So I'm pretty excited about that.

**Shivani** [00:08:38] It really is all echoing the difference that you can make for the next generation, the people that are here, but the generations to come with that 360 that you talked about in childcare. Alisi, when I listen to your story, I think, goodness, you've got more dashes and more line items that you could add to your resumé in your LinkedIn profile that most of us can ever dream of. You know, the construction work, the recruitment work, the work that you've done on the Block, I can see how it's all truly aligned with your sense of purpose. But goodness, please do share how you manage your time to make that all happen.

**Alisi** [00:09:11] Look that's a learning journey that I'm still on, I don't think anyone ever perfects the organisational concept of time, really, especially when you're a mum. I'm a mum of two so you know, I just really try and balance to make it worth first and foremost for my family. If it doesn't work for my family and my kids, then everything else is not working because it has to, you know, I've got to be first and foremost present for my family and then everything else just balances out. I'm able to do this, I think, particularly over the last two years, effectively, because I've started to get the right people around in my team. For so long I operated as a one-man band, and when I say that, I had a very, very tight skeleton crew and I've only just in the last 24 months, started to expand those teams out with skilled people, realised that I can't do this on my own, but having that trusted circle of, you know, incredible staff has really enabled me to look back and use my time more wisely not so much working in the businesses, but on them and that strategic growth.

**Shivani** [00:10:13] That's really incredible, does it work for my family and of course, you do have your incredible team of advisors around you, but I wonder if that actually helps get buy in and support from your family. When you're taking on a new project, do you actually sit down with your family and talk to them about it and sort of get their buy in?

**Alisi** [00:10:31] Definitely, 100%, my, I guess my husband and my children would be my biggest fans and without them I don't think, you know, I could do it. My husband is actually we're very strong in our faith. He's a pastor at the Baptist Riverstone Church. So, you know, from the moment we wake up, he's speaking life into that purpose and then we do that to our children. So every big project that I'm taking on, if I know that there's any chance at all that that's going to impact my time with my kids or my husband, there's a conversation that needs to happen.

**Shivani** [00:11:01] Alisi, there is something that I want to discover here with you, and that is around how to solve social issues using the power of diversity because you've done exactly that. And you've brought upon diverse people to the decision-making table at very complex levels by igniting industry, corporate, government and start-up to solve the issues. But I'd love to know how you would achieve this level of stakeholder engagement?

**Alisi** [00:11:27] Yes, I think a big part of achieving that level of stakeholder engagement is definitely having those strong relationships, particularly on that grassroots level in the community. My role, I guess with the Aboriginal Housing Company in particular, Pemulwuy Project, you know, we had government, we had private, corporate, we had philanthropic, we had community, even conversations that I guess probably were unnecessary we had to deal with because of the politics in the community. You know, we had to jump through several hoops to get to what we had to do, the ability to deliver on what we have down there with developing the affordable housing without any government assistance enabled us, I guess, the I don't know that word you would call it almost like the evidence that we actually could do it without anyone, you know, it almost got the corporates to stand up and go, hold on a sec, maybe this is what self-determination really is about. You know, we might have been utilising this type of language in governance and policy in documents for generations. But these guys have actually achieved it, they're living it. This is just not another RAP plan on the wall. And when we've had now just recently government people come and visit the site, they almost fall over themselves because they've, they really, they've got nothing to say about it, you know, and that's a powerful moment. And I can tell you right now, two years ago; we couldn't get anyone to the table. We are now shutting the door on people because we can't meet the demand of the people that want to come and sit at the table with us. So I think a big part of it and look, I can only speak on behalf of the 13 years I was there, but the Aboriginal Housing Company turns 50 next year. So this incredible team and a lot of the team members have been there 45 years plus, have been at this for a long time and have been trying to get people to the table for a long time. But I think because of their perseverance and their commitment to the vision that we could actually achieve this and we've been able to independently that is what has got people to the table. We've now realised this vision and I guess also keeping the transparency clear with all those stakeholders was

a big part of it. As annoying and as frustrating as it is, you know, not that it's something that we had a compliance requirement to do, but I made sure every part of the way, particularly these last five years of the development, by keeping the government involved. I kept them alert. I kept them advised. I kept them current with what we were doing. But I did it because I believed it was important for them to, I guess, understand firsthand what this process looked like.

**Shivani** [00:14:03] It sounds like evidence-based leadership, but also communicative and inclusion-based leadership. A lot of people don't often even get that far, particularly in dealing with the likes of government or anyone that they may feel as a senior stakeholder because of this nagging thing called imposter syndrome that tends to happen to so many of us. Is that something that you've ever experienced Alisi, and if so, how do you overcome it?

**Alisi** [00:14:31] Oh, look, it was definitely a feeling that I think a lot of us had particularly coming in to such a grand development, you know, whether it was dealing with the Department of Planning or the City of Sydney Council or the architects or the, you know, the building and construction team, there were three of us, the execs are part of every part of that process, the design excellence meetings, the independent planning review. You're sitting there with these people and with the likes of Lendlease and all your big Barangaroots next-door to you in the other rooms and you're like, we're really here. And the one thing that I guess carried us through was understanding that we had got there because of the purpose and the journey that we're on and the path. And a big part of, I guess me I can speak personally about is I kept pushing forward because of the amazing mentors I had around me, you know, they just kept championing me on. And although, you know, they kept pushing me in the limelight, not that I wanted to always be in the limelight, but they were my biggest champions. And one of my greatest mentors, Uncle Mick Mundine, who's the CEO of the Aboriginal Housing Company, he's been there 45 years, he said, we've done our bit, bub, and I'd usually just roll my eyes. But he said, we've done our bit bub. The reason why you're able to sit equal at that table was because of our forefathers and the work they did. Now it's your turn. And it was at that moment I just thought, you know what, I'm meant to be here. This is my time and if it's not a time like this, then when.

**Shivani** [00:15:55] Something that this really echoes is the need to solve our own needs as a catalyst for leadership. And Alisi, I'd like to dive deeper in that, particularly in solving your needs through the experience of living in the Block and how that was a powerful first-hand experience for you as a leader.

**Alisi** [00:16:12] Oh, definitely, I remember when I first moved to the Block in the year 2000, and I lived right on Caroline Street and, you know, living in a community where the drugs and alcohol and the crime and, you know, basically bearing first witness to the destruction of your own people was something that really motivated me to not just try and, you know, achieve change, but walk it. You know, I knew at that moment that this is not how, you know, our people are supposed to live. You know, this is not what but in particular, for me personally, God had, you know, when he said a purpose for our people. So, you know, that was a big, I guess, you know, motivation and wakeup call for me. And then I guess stemming on from while living at the Block and being in the many leadership roles, I remember I was managing one of the services with human services at Centrelink and understanding then from a social point first-hand, a lot of the issue, having community members coming in and then also working with the Department of Community Services with children. I was fortunate enough to work in so many social areas that enabled me the insight, you know, to all the different areas that our people struggled in. And I guess that's what really inspired me to branch out and start my own business because I did not want to be limited and I didn't want to have to deal with the challenges of red tape when I wanted to, I guess, orchestrate how I invested into my community and, you know, acknowledged and dealt with those needs. So I guess all that work from living on the block and it wasn't easy. I'm not going to say it was rosy. It was a very challenging time. And it was hard, I guess, in itself because, you know, as an 18-year old girl living the life that you live, and I usually struggle with a lot of my identity because I was only new to the block, I had to then move into a new Aboriginal community being raised between my father and mother and then try and be accepted in that community while still seeking my own identity that was a big challenge for me, but because I was fortunate enough to jump straight into work, that kind of distracted me and maybe focus on the purpose and having those incredible mentors around me that was, I guess, the biggest benefit that helped me kind of navigate that journey.

**Shivani** [00:18:23] Alisi, you're so open with the challenges that you've experienced in early life and now and I couldn't agree more about the power of community, the power of mentors in doing that, how do you work

with sharing those stories so that you can gain trust and transparency with the community through your leadership journey?

**Alisi** [00:18:44] Look, I love a good yarn. You know, I'm a big communicator and despite what leadership platform I'm in, I've always been, I guess the business owner or the manager that will always make sure that I take time to go and sit on that grass and have that yarn, have that any community event, whether it's a local inter-agency or a little barbecue, whether it's five people or 500, I'm the first there, and I'm not just there to be present, I'm helping out, you know, turn a sausage, cleaning up. I'm such a big believer in always just being present, particularly when it comes to community, because at the end of the day, you can be in any influential role that you want. If you don't have the buy-in from the community, then they're not going to want to receive that help. And that's you know, that's the biggest challenge is them receiving the help that you're working so hard to deliver.

**Shivani** [00:19:29] There are so many things that I could take away from our time together today. In particular, there was a quote that you just talked about, which is, don't just achieve change, but walk it. I want to say what else you can share with us for our Leadership Toolkit. Alisi, at Leading Women, we are committed to activating women's leadership, what tool has ignited your leadership that you can share with us for the Leadership Toolbox?

**Alisi** [00:19:53] If I could leave one thing today, it would probably be the importance of having those aunties, those mothers and those sisters that group of leaders, you know, those group of champions, because they really have been the backbone to my journey. You know, whether it's one of the aunties encouraging you to continue to elevate and succeed, it's another auntie telling you that you didn't wipe the sleep out of your eye and the other one telling you to spray yourself like whatever it is each and every one of those ladies play such a, you know, a vital role and they have in my success. Not just for the success, you know, professionally, but for your soul, for your family life, you know. So if there's one thing, it's the importance of having that and where a lot of ladies, I can acknowledge, particularly if they don't have those strong circles where a lot of ladies can identify that they don't have those connections to those circles, they exist in the community. You've just got to reach out. And I can tell you there are so many community women and leaders that are just out there wanting to connect with other women so that's what I would leave.

**Shivani** [00:20:54] Find your people; find your community and your champions because they are there in particular look for those aunties, mothers and sisters, who are right there around you. Such sage advice from Alisi Tutuila, thank you so much for being with us here today at Leading Women.

**Alisi** [00:21:11] Thank you so much, Shivani. I'm very honoured.

**Julienne** [00:21:14] 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 [womeninfocus.com.au](http://womeninfocus.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)

**Things you should know:** Guests featured in the podcast are speaking from their personal experiences only. As this podcast has been prepared without considering your objectives, financial situation or needs, you should, before acting on the content consider its appropriateness to your circumstances. CommBank does not necessarily endorse the views of a particular individual or guarantee the accuracy of the information provided.