



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

Episode 7: Felicity McGahan, Group CEO, Strand

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Interviewee: Felicity McGahan**

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Felicity McGahan, Group CEO, Strand on following her generational calling into retail, traversing the globe to lead many flagship brands to success and the importance of the three Cs of leadership.

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.

Shivani [00:00:34] Welcome to Leading Women, where we support your leadership journey. I'm your host, Shivani Gopal, and today's episode is an energetic conversation with an ever-evolving leader who's navigating an iconic business into the future. Felicity McGahan, Group CEO, Strand followed her generational calling into retail, traversing the globe to lead many flagship brands to success. Felicity shares the importance of the three Cs staying calm, being in control and communicating when leading through adversity, and the lessons of balancing crisis with a focus on the future. Enjoy this episode filled with advice around mentoring our next lucky generation of women leaders, being relentless with your goals, normalising 360 feedback and the importance of the pause. Felicity, welcome to Leading Women. I am so thrilled to be speaking with you today in our studios on Gadigal country. Where are you joining us from?

Felicity [00:01:40] I'm actually joining you from Boonwurrung country in the beautiful area of Albert Park in Victoria.

Shivani [00:01:46] And we've got so much to tune into today, Felicity, I want to start with your leadership journey because it has been an intrepid and impactful one against an ever changing backdrop. Can you share how you took the path less trodden to here?

Felicity [00:02:02] Sure, well, I firstly, the challenge for me was always school wasn't my thing. So I got straight into retail after school and started in Australia working for Esprit in Sportsgirl in the day, just a store manager and on the floor there and then got an opportunity to go overseas and I relocated to the US and ended up a 20-year career with Gap in multiple countries throughout the US and the UK and then missed Australia often. So came back and ran the Sussan business. I jumped quite a bit from functional leader, very much focused on the marketing side of the business to general management across different brands. So worked for Sussan as their CEO and then to Cotton On. I came back to Australia for Cotton On and then most recently I am the current Group CEO for Strand, another big iconic business. So it's been an adventure and one that I've thoroughly enjoyed in many countries. It's a very small world in my eyes. So yes, it's been a great journey.

Shivani [00:03:03] Many countries, many brands indeed, Felicity, you have had a fascinating career. Let's dive into the question that I'm sure many of our audience members are actually thinking. Being at the helm of an iconic retail business through a pandemic must have tested every facet of your leadership, but also some facets that you probably didn't think you even had. How did you lead through adversity when you had no control over the situation or even any light at the end of the tunnel, as they say at the time?

Felicity [00:03:33] Well, it was an incredible period for all of us, and I don't think anyone, all the crisis leadership classes that we'd gone through kind of went out the door because we all realised we'd never expected to lose all our stores or shut our total business, you know, and the impact that that had on people and us as leaders and I think look, for all of us, it was one of those situations that was out of our control. And I think what that did was it brought us all together to unite and get really focused on what we needed to do to survive. And we stayed calm as a leadership team. And certainly I realised my role being very calm and in control and the amount of communication, whether it was to team, to customers, to business partners, which is ongoing, and just to stay focused and empower the teams to do what they all were great at. We all knew what we needed to do from, you know, letting teams know where they stood to closing stores to pushing suppliers in and product out in different countries and everyone just did what they needed to do and we got through. But we also made sure that we were focused, that there was light at the end. We never for a minute didn't think there was light at the end. We knew that it was a wave. We didn't know how long it was going to last for, but we knew that we were going to come out the other end and we were really focused on investing as well. And I think that was the key to a leader to balance the crisis with the focus on the future and just keep everyone calm and focused. And it was every day and it was a journey.

Shivani [00:05:03] It certainly sounds like it and it sounds like you created your own light. You and the team created your own light in a time where you didn't know when it was coming. Felicity, you've talked a lot about being calm and in control, which makes me think about managing your own mindset. How did you do that so that you could lead with certainty?

Felicity [00:05:23] You know, I really believed that it wasn't something I was briefed that I had to believe it. I truly believed that we would get back to a new normal, and we were just so incredibly focused as a team on what we needed to do. And I fed off a lot of the team members. We really found ways of engaging. I had one employee that was, I don't know if he would say if it was a good thing or not, but he lived in my 5k, you know, we would walk together and talk together and that was just fantastic to stay connected and realise people just needed to talk. I have a mentor that used to be my old boss that lives within my 5k and you know, we all came together, the industry as well. We all talked to each other like we'd never talked and really supported each other on getting through. And I think that's where, you know, these things do bring out a lot of positives. And there were definitely a lot of positives that came out in that very difficult time.

Shivani [00:06:17] Let's learn more about those positives. Looking back now on those really hard years, what do you think you learnt about yourself during that time?

Felicity [00:06:25] My biggest challenge in my life, and it's something I talk to my daughter about not duplicating, is that I've always struggled to balance work, family and myself. I tend to have always traded myself off and focused on work and family, and I really found that time in COVID to give back to myself and look after my own health and realise that that was as important, if not more important than the others. It was a big wake up for me to learn at 50, I'm trying to teach that to her now, but it's something I definitely came out of that realising the importance of health and balance.

Shivani [00:07:00] I actually just wrote that down work, family and myself, and it's so important that we balance it all out and the fact that we cannot trade ourselves. What a powerful statement for all of our listeners. Felicity, when we were speaking previously, you told me some really interesting stories about how the team came together during this time of crisis, and it was almost easier because they couldn't blame the company, they couldn't blame anyone else. Someone else was to blame. And so it created this real level of unity, I'd love for you to shed some light on that.

Felicity [00:07:35] Yes, it's really interesting. I think when we are in businesses where, you know, every week the customer votes and you know, it's very easy to blame product, blame marketing, blame execution. And when business is tough and I think when something this scale happened, there was no one to blame. It was a situation that we all had to actually reverse and just come together and trust each other and trust that each leader could do their piece to bring the company and the teams through a really challenging period. And it brought the best out in us as a team. We all came a lot closer. We all really understood, no one let anyone down. There was no time for that. There wasn't even time to, you know, get caught up in to be honest, running a business, you couldn't really get that caught up in the government side. And should we be locked down or not, it was kind of like we are. What can we now control? And let's get really focused on that you

know, we were dealt a really tough card and we would never have expected to shut 300 stores and not have a business. But we pivoted as a team and we got through it as a team. And I think we've come out of it the other side stronger as a team.

Shivani [00:08:39] You talk a lot about trust and moving closer and it makes me think that you were so open around your own feelings and leading through vulnerability. What lessons do you have to share around being vulnerable and role modeling that through your leadership?

Felicity [00:08:55] I think honesty is so important. Like this generation, particularly the amount of information, everyone knows everything. I mean, I was coming in to communicate the status of, you know, where we're at as a business and everyone had already got the status, whether it was from their schools, the news, they knew what was going on. And I just think that you've just got to be honest and be true to the teams. Take them on the journey and explain the why we were doing things, not just what we were doing, but why we were doing it. You know, we stepped everybody down because we had to do it to get the company through the crisis, not because we wanted to. It was just we did some restructuring, which was very difficult. But again, we had a responsibility of 2,000, two and a half thousand employees to make sure we had a business on the other side. So, you know, I think that honesty and that genuine style of leadership with just authenticity, I think it's so important today.

Shivani [00:09:49] It really is but in giving so much of yourself and also going through such difficult time through the pandemic and as you said, having to stand so many employees down, how did you take care of yourself? We've talked a little bit about this around you can't trade yourself. So what rituals did you create that made a really big difference for you?

Felicity [00:10:10] I took my commute that used to be my commute time, and I gave that back to myself. And I started walking every day and giving myself permission for me time. And I've never done that before in my career. I'm very lucky to live in a beautiful area and had the open beaches and was able just to walk along and get a clear head and get really clear on what my messaging was and look after my health. I lost a lot of weight. I ate better. I think I went to that, what can I control? And I could certainly control getting outside, looking after myself and building my strength up so I can be in a good headspace to lead the business and the team through. And I was I've never been in a better headspace.

Shivani [00:10:49] And speaking of positivity, I think that had a big role to play for you in staying relevant in business and leadership. Felicity, rebranding for relevance was key in the Strand rebrand and you've hit the mark across generations so congratulations on that, that is a huge feat. When it comes to staying fresh and relevant, it also applies to your leadership style. So how is that continually involved to stay relevant to stakeholders as well, design and retail teams?

Felicity [00:11:20] You know, I've always had this saying around change or fail, and I think that we have to always, as we've discussed, evolve our business is to stay relevant, but I don't think our style is any different to that. You know, I've got different generations of team members across the business and it's interesting. Yes, there's uniqueness and we could have a good laugh on some of the things that happened. And I just am like, oh my gosh, you know but I think the consistency is our values underpin our behaviour and our values are multiple generational. They're not a value that's designed for a specific generation. And I think that that's really important to me is to live through my values. I'm a very grounded leader. I love what I do. I talk about being a radiator, not a drain. Like I love bringing energy to a business and a team and people and I think it's a really important quality for leaders to have. I don't think everyone needs to, you know, they could find that in very different ways. It's not one way of delivering that, but it's just so important that you're bringing people along on the journey and that, you know, you're inspiring them to want to be better and to believe that anything's possible, whether it's for themselves or a business. You know, I have a lot of women, obviously, you know, over 90%, most of the businesses I've worked with, are female businesses. I do gravitate because I love showing women that you can be a mother and have a career and anything's possible. You just have to want it and you can structure it in a way to make sure that you get that and it's really about whether you want it, I think, versus whether it's available or not. And then when you wanted it, setting out those goals around what success looks like to show you that you're meeting your own expectations, no one else's. You know, we all put into life what we want out of it. And if you want a lot out of life, put a lot in. If you want a little bit, put a little bit, it's fine that's your personal choice. But I just have found myself as a leader that's been really inspired by

the people I've been surrounded by. And I love this next generation. I think they're a classic. I think they're going to, they do it better than all of us. They're incredible. They want it all. They want their lives. They want their holidays. They want their balance. They want it all. And, you know, with technology, they're probably going to get it all, which is incredible, so it's great.

Shivani [00:13:33] Of course, you are a self-confessed goal achiever, as you've just said, how have your goals kept you focused and evolved over time?

Felicity [00:13:41] Look, I think goals for me is something that it's just how do you know you achieved what you wanted to without a goal? It's the same in business unless you put a number of goals, how do you all come together to say we did it? You know, and I love that feeling of succeeding at the end, so why not have them personally as well? And I think those goals evolve over time. The first goal I ever set myself was when I was 15 and I wanted this pink tape recorder and it was \$270 and I didn't have a birthday coming up or Christmas, so I knew I wasn't going to get it. So I skipped the week of school to get \$280 to buy it for myself. And it was I think it gave me that sense of if you really want something, is find a way. And I found a way and I got it. And I think I've just taken that through life. And what's interesting is I think you go through periods in life where the goals are quite materialistic, whether they're cars or houses or things like that. And then I'm at a stage now where they're more experiential holidays and time with family, you know, the goals they shift relative to where you are at that point in life. But they represent the same thing, that moment at the end where you've achieved that next journey and then you can pivot to the next one. And I think that's how I've kind of framed up my life. It's like, okay, what's the next thing and got excited about that.

Shivani [00:15:00] What other courageous leaps have you taken to take your business and leadership to the next level?

Felicity [00:15:05] I think the biggest, the most courageous one is just when I make, you know, I have a fabulous husband that supports my career. We're an incredible team. He stayed at home and looked after the kids their whole 20 plus years. And, you know, I'm the one that tends to navigate when we're ready for a change. And I get there because I feel like I'm hitting a point where, you know, I always say to my kids, you know, everyone has a bad day. Everyone can have a tough week. But when it's months that you're questioning, you really should start to drive change. And I like to get ahead of it. I don't like to get to a point in my career or in my life where it's a tougher period and I'm now in a hole to make a change. I actually tend to make change happen when things are very good and, you know, but those changes and having that confidence to take another role in another country, five of the assignments that I've taken over my career over what required international relocations and moving a family is a big deal, not a big logistics deal, but a big deal to set a family up and set schools up and all of that kind of thing. And I think they're the big leaps that I always feel like will make it work and we do. We go in with the right attitude that it's a great journey and it's just a part of our life adventure. And that's what life is and that's what we're celebrating. And yes and if it doesn't work, we'll just make another change and correct it. I put my daughter in a school. It wasn't the right cultural fit for her. I pulled her out six weeks later. It was fine. We all moved on. We learnt a lot from it and we reflected on what we learnt. And still today I think it was the right decision. But I think the lesson is that not everything's gold and we're going to make mistakes. But for me it's all about the journey and having fun on the way and bringing kids up in an environment where change is part of their everyday.

Shivani [00:16:50] You have had such an interesting journey and a career that's taken you all across the globe and it seems your journey is now looking forward to other pathways for women in Australia and one that is dedicated into mentoring and giving back. What is your view of the leadership landscape and new pathways for leadership for women?

Felicity [00:17:10] Look, I think it's just for me it's like this slow pain, where I just save the girls again, create the path that you want, be the woman that you want to be and dream big, and stay focused and surround yourself with great people and enjoy the journey. And I think for me that's part of the mentoring today is just what are they looking for? Like, I think, I always start my sessions with what brings you joy? What do you love? Like just tell me anything that you love, that you smile, because then we can start to carve out what's right for right now based off what you love today. And it'll change over time because again, it's all a journey. It's all life's journeys. It's just one step to or one chapter in a very exciting, very exciting novel, you know so that's the piece for me is just making the girls realise that, as I said to you before, a lot of young women that I

do mentor on this because they go from school to uni. They might decide they're going to this uni because all their friends are going to it, not necessarily or they did really well in these subjects because they're incredibly intelligent, not necessarily because they're that passionate about it. And you've really got to unlock their passion and then you've got to help shape them and direct them and give them people to talk to, to bring that to life. And it's exciting, I love that more than anything. It's, I just love it.

Shivani [00:18:31] You've done that in a very practical way by giving mentoring and turning it into activation, because of course, when you are able to do what you love you're generally in flow and you end up being pretty good at it and you were able to pick something like that out for your goddaughter, who was going to drop out of university. And I hear that you gave her some phenomenal advice and I'd love to hear it.

Felicity [00:18:53] She's just the most gorgeous girl and she's incredibly intelligent and she's been one of these amazing self-made influencers that's built an incredible brand on herself. And I've watched her for years evolve through this. And I'm like, I was just surprised when she was finishing school and like, you're so obviously a digital marketer. I mean, it's what you've actually been doing since you were 15-years-old, and I just helped her connect what she'd been doing to the industry and for her to realise that she could actually have a path at that and she's since gone on to start studying now digital marketing at RMIT and I'm sure she'll be amazing in that space.

Shivani [00:19:29] One of the leadership lessons that I love that you try to normalise is that leadership comes in different forms. It doesn't necessarily have to be the cookie cutter mould or the really studios one. In fact, I hear that you growing up were incredibly disruptive and hey, look at you now.

Felicity [00:19:49] Yes, school wasn't my big thing. I thought it was a fabulous social outlet, but it really wasn't my thing. My thing was certainly once I got on the ground and learnt by experience and had to be a lot more hands-on to grow. But yes, it's probably some of the same things I'm still working through that were in my 15-year-old school reports are in my 360 feedbacks today. Some of the traits are still consistent because they are your brand and we're all our own brands. And I think that's the thing and it's just got to be something that you feel comfortable, it's authentic to you and that you know, it's something that you are bringing to whether it's your team, to a business, a level of inspiration and energy and passion and excitement around achieving great things together. And I think that's the brand that I've just created for myself. And as I said, all my different leaders, we've all got different brands. No one's got a right or wrong, it's just we're all quite unique in our own personal styles.

Shivani [00:20:45] Felicity, I feel like you've given us so many gems there. I'm going to see if there's just a couple more that you can leave us with. At Leading Women, we're committed to activating women's leadership. What tool would you like to leave for us all in the Toolbox to take our leadership to the next level?

Felicity [00:21:01] I think for me, it's this vision that you set yourself, hence the quote that I have in my office, which is just to dream big, work hard, stay focused and surround yourself with great people like I have that as my mantra and it's really quite simple and it really has served me. And I think that it's a really good framework for a lot of people that are beginning their leadership journey.

Shivani [00:21:24] I think our audiences would have had so many aha moments just listening to you for me, you know, consistency of living to your values and everything in leadership is all about people and the intent around feedback that and so much more with all of the gold in our conversation today. Felicity McGahan, thank you so much for joining us today at Leading Women.

Felicity [00:21:47] You're so welcome and thank you so much for having me.

Julienne [00:21:50] 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 womenifocus.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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