



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

**Episode 3: Genevieve Bell AO**

**Hosted by: Shivani Gopal  
Interviewee: Genevieve Bell AO**

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

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Genevieve Bell AO, Director of the School of Cybernetics, Founding Director of 3A Institute and non-executive director on the three elements of leadership, daring to call out the bold truth and befriending our inner critic.

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**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 ComnBank'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] Genevieve Bell AO is the Director of the School of Cybernetics, Founding Director of 3A Institute and non-executive director with a moral obligation to create a more fair and more just world. From the depths of academia to scaling high level leadership in Silicon Valley and navigating the breadth of boardrooms, Genevieve shares how leadership is about three elements, acting in concert, engaging people's heads, hearts and hands to ideate, generate and activate change. Daring to call out the bold truth, Genevieve implores us to befriend our inner critic. Know ourselves. Catch up constantly with our achievements and celebrate what makes us unique. Genevieve Bell, welcome to Leading Women. I'm speaking to you here in studio on Gadigal Land. Where are you joining us from today?

**Genevieve** [00:01:34] I'm joining you from the lands of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people, where I am at the Australian University and where I want to pay my respects to elders past and present and to acknowledge that I'm on land that was always sacred and never ceded.

**Shivani** [00:01:46] Well, I'm really looking forward to our discussion today, Genevieve, to really tease out your leadership journey, because my goodness, is there a lot to share and talk about. Yours is an extraordinary future focused and diverse leadership journey. Can you share how your leadership was sparked and your path to here?

**Genevieve** [00:02:07] Oh wow, it was a varied and meandering path, I sometimes think, I find myself ironically back in the place I finished high school, which had you asked my high school self would not have been where I thought I would be in this moment in my life. But I find myself as the Director of the first new school at the Australian National University in 40 years. I find myself building a new inter-disciplinary, diverse, intersectional team of amazing people, building a mad new adventure together. So I couldn't be happier, in some ways, this is completely my element.

**Shivani** [00:02:41] And speaking of your element, it sounds like your element was your calling very early in life. Walking through your leadership journey. I can't help but draw the parallel of your job and your leadership path. Essentially, your job is to invent the future while engaging all our humanness and lived experience.

**Genevieve** [00:03:02] That's such a lovely glossing up of me.

**Shivani** [00:03:06] Does it not deserve glossing up when we are talking about inventing the future and then creating a seat at the table and doing so much more, I don't know.

**Genevieve** [00:03:14] Listen, Shivani, I mean, it's always a really good question of how do you end up in the place you are in and what are the pieces of the kind of the puzzle that you carry through with you? And I said, I'm back in the place I spent some of my childhood and that's true. And I had a sort of an unexpected childhood. I moved around a lot. I spent some time in Central Australia, lived in Aboriginal communities in the 1970s and 1980s, spent my time with elders on country, hearing their stories and living a very, I think, different childhood than my peers. And when I came back from being in Central Australia, back to Canberra, I found myself in a lot of conflict. I was joking with one of my team members today that I spent more time on detention than the average human being might have because I got into it with one of my teachers, who explained to me that Captain Cook discovered Australia and I was just having none of that. All of ten years old declaring that was wrong. And I got marched up onto to detention and my mother sat me down because I'd had a few of these conflicts and said something to me that stuck with me ever since and kind of framed my whole life since then, which was that basically said to me, she's like, look, we need to actively be building a future that's different than the present in which we find ourselves. In fact, we have a moral obligation to make the world a better place and better for all the voices that won't necessarily find themselves into the room and better by, for her in those days, being more fair and more just. And she was really clear that that meant you had to put everything on the line, your time, your energy, your passion, your intellect, your money, your life, if it came to that and that you had this like driving compulsion, that the world had to be better than the place in which we found ourselves and that was a really powerful thing to grasp as a small child. And it's been a North Star of mine ever since, that the roles I take, the places I find myself, it's about making sure that what I am doing makes the world better. And I think over time I've come to understand that in different ways. I think over the last couple of years I've come to think of my role as a leader as doing two things right, both related to that original kind of guidance from my mother. Part one is that I think you have as a leader for me at least, I think I have an obligation to tell stories about the future and stories that are more optimistic, more hopeful, but also more just, more sustainable, more equitable, more fair, and that we need those hopeful stories in a time when we're surrounded by dystopic narratives and things feeling out of our control and occasionally hopeless. We actually need to remind ourselves that a different future is possible. But I think it's not just enough to tell those stories. I think you then also have this other piece of work you need to do, which is how do you actively set about disrupting the present so that those stories aren't just stories. They're actual futures we can live in and so somewhere as a leader, I tend to think you have to do both those things, tell stories and act differently in the present so that those two things find a moment of alignment.

**Shivani** [00:06:09] It's incredible, isn't it, how much of that inspiration is sparked within us from childhood, so much of what you're saying actually reminds me of a book that I've got sitting on my bookshelf called Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls. And it's funny, you weren't actually rebelling. You were just daring to be different and daring to call out the bold truth that so few had dared to look at and acknowledge. Do you think that's been one of the catalysts for how your leadership journey has transpired today?

**Genevieve** [00:06:39] Look, I've always been a little bit different. I am sort of acutely aware of that, I'm sort of aware that I have spent most of my working life for the last 25 plus years in places where I wasn't like other people. So I went to the United States for my undergraduate education, which was unusual in the 80s coming out of Australia. You know, I ran away from home effectively to go to America and to do a degree at a university most people hadn't heard of, and then go to a Ph.D. at Stanford, which was again, a kind of a weird thing, I think, in an Oxbridge Australia in those days. So there was a bit of a why has she gone there? And then I walked away from the university sector and joined the high tech industry in the late 1990s. And when I turned up at Intel, you know, I was about as weird to them as you could possibly be. I was an anthropologist. I was Australian. I was a woman. I had this mop of completely untamed hair and I refused to dress the part so I just stuck out. Every time I opened my mouth, I just didn't sound like anyone else. And, you know, I was lucky in some ways. I landed in a group with a set of leaders, who thought that being different was a virtue, not something that they needed to manage and not something they needed to manage me into conforming. But, you know, I've had now a multi-decade career where I've always been a little bit odd.

**Shivani** [00:07:59] You speak of yourself as weird and yes, we see you as an incredibly accomplished woman. How do you think the importance of knowing yourself has enabled you to contain and then propel your self-perception?

**Genevieve** [00:08:14] Oh, yes, I always think that's such an interesting piece of the puzzle. So I said, I left Stanford and went to Intel that was a traumatic transition in some ways. I mean, it was very Australian or an

Australian of 30 years ago where it's kind of like you're driving along doing one thing la la la la la, and then you suddenly make a 90-degree turn and go somewhere else. I've been trained to be an academic. I was in a kind of a very well respected American institution, and stepping away from being an academic anthropologist and becoming someone in industry was very, very odd in the late 1990s. And indeed my supervisor was very angry with me. He thought that was a terrible waste. And so I turned up at Intel without a lot of support from the place I'd been in. And the support I had was from my very close friends and family who were kind of like, yes, you know, what's the worst thing that's going to happen there? Like you might find it interesting. And as I said, I was really lucky when I landed at Intel, and in that moment in Silicon Valley in the early by that point 2000s. It was a place that invested in talent. And so I turned up as this strange speaking, strange looking creature full of ideas that were very unusual and slightly confronting. And rather than anyone going, oi, young lady like, sort of could you do something about all of that? They went, you seem interesting, we should invest in that. And I was lucky to be the beneficiary of a series of processes that invested in leadership, and they invested it in two completely different ways, which I've come to realise are hugely important. One was about skilling me up. So teaching me about theories of leadership, theories of organisational structure, theories about business and business skills. So basically a mini MBA-like experience, like here's how to think about these things so the intellectual, the head piece of the puzzle. They're also kind of like, you shouldn't just learn it theoretically, now you have to go practice it. So there was a bit about putting you in circumstances where you had to work out what you could do and, you know, learn to back yourself in those conversations and take what you learned in the classroom and in books and instructors and put them into practice. But then I think the other piece that Intel was very good at when I was there was investing in giving you skills as a human being. It wasn't just about the theory and practice of leadership, it was about knowing who you were and knowing what motivated you and what your nervous tics and twitches were and what your buttons were, and learning how to manage those a little more effectively and know how you responded in a crisis or how you didn't respond and learning to know yourself. And I think, you know, as I mentor people, now I usually say to people, look, there's two things you need to know. There are a whole lot of books you can actually go read about being a good leader and all of them will be useful. But you also need to invest time in knowing who you are and what you value and where you need to work on yourself. And for me, gosh, that was a lot of what I needed to do there.

**Shivani** [00:11:10] As you were sharing your story, a little line came into my mind and that is that you stand out because you stand up as yourself. And when you do that, you invest in yourself and others do too. It seems very resonant of your experience and your journey. But as you were standing up as yourself, you also had some confronting and conflicting pieces of experiences and advice. I remember a little story that you were sharing with us earlier about you being in the Intel bathroom and just suddenly getting some unsolicited advice. Can you share that with us again, please?

**Genevieve** [00:11:46] Yes, absolutely can, so here I am as an emerging leader. And as you say, I look a little bit different. I certainly sounded a little bit different. And I wandered into the women's toilets at an Intel event, as you do. And there were some very senior women there and they'd been talking about me, which is always a bit unnerving a bit when everyone's talking about you. At least for me, I'm like woah. So we were just discussing you and I'm sure I froze the proverbial deer in the headlights, like, why? Like we were just talking about how brave you were. And I said, why? And they're like, well, because you don't straighten your hair. Now, for your listeners, you need to know that my head is a mass of curly hair. It has grown out of my head, untamed and feral since I was a small child, and it is always been the great ire of my family that I didn't get the nice straight, blonde, tidy hair, I got this and I've never really done anything with it other than occasionally remember to brush it. And so there was a collection of women standing in a room concerned about my hair was really quite unnerving for me. And then one of them said, yes, you get away with it, though, because you're a creative. I remember walking out of the room and thinking that was an attempt by a group of people to do two things. One was it was an attempt to tell me that I needed to change myself. As in, if you straightened your hair, you'd look more like us, more like us would be better because standing out not good. And it was also a kind of reminder that I was being bucketed a certain kind of way because of the way I looked. And I'm sure lots of us have had those moments where someone has given you feedback and you had to have a bit of a think about does that feedback resonate with me or is it an attempt to manage me? And I remember thinking; I don't want to straighten my hair. First of all, that takes a long time and I'm just not up for it. And secondly, it's like kind of this is how I see myself. But I also understand that there are moments when those are difficult choices. Do you change the way you dress? Do you change the way you sound? Do you make decisions about how you do and don't fit in? And I was lucky enough that I had at that point

enough social capital to decide I wasn't going to straighten my hair and that I was going to kind of wear my shoulders back and say, no, actually, I'm going to keep being this. But I had other advice too, along the way about how to be that I have had to internalise differently. So as you reasonably say, Shivani, I went through a time of sort of looking and sounding a little bit odd and I think I also had to think about who I was and what I was going to need to grow up about myself. And so although I've spent much of the last 20 years on stages giving keynotes in large, large environments, I'm really very shy. I don't sound like that because I've learnt to be kind of personable and I like human beings. Like, I don't like people. I love people. People are fascinating, I'm endlessly interested in wanting to be around humans. But I also blush a lot when I get called on still, very shy. And as a result, I'm also sometimes really awkward. And so learning to think about how to manage my shyness with the way other people perceive me creates some really interesting moments. And there was a moment not that long ago now where I came off the stage and I'd given a keynote and I could think of all the ways I had done it well, because I have tendencies to want to be really good. So I have a list of things I'm trying to do, and I knew all the places I'd gone badly. And someone came up to me to tell me that something I'd said had really resonated with them and that that had been a really powerful thing for them. And I looked at this person and I told her all the things I'd done wrong in that speech and why it was catastrophically bad and she kind of walked off. And one of my colleagues was standing there and he took me backstage and he said to me, you can't ever do that again. I'm like, what are you talking about? I was just being honest. And he's like, do you understand what it took for that person to gather up the strength to come and say to someone who'd been on the stage that something they had said resonated? And you then proceeded to explain to her why everything you'd said was bad. So my colleague said to me, he's like that was a terrible thing you just did. And I remember and I was horrified, I was mortified that I would have been cruel to someone unintentionally, cause that's not how I like to think of myself. And it took me back because I had to sort of have a moment of going, I thought I was just being honest, but maybe I was sort of disconnected from myself in the way other people saw me. So you were giving me that lovely introduction at the beginning, and I accused you of glowing and glossing me up. And it's the same thing, right?

**Shivani** [00:16:19] It's interesting because it sounds like it speaks to your inner critic, which has its volume really loud at certain times, and it drowns out all of your accomplishments and accolades, but also your very ability to be third person-orientated and think about the impact that you're having on someone else. Has that been the only time that you've experienced your inner critic or had an experience with imposter syndrome? Or is this something that you go through from time-to-time?

**Genevieve** [00:16:48] When I was at Intel full-time and when Intel was investing in me, they invested in a coach for me, which was an extraordinary investment on their part, an amazing thing for me. And I was doing the usual Australian routine with her, tall poppy-syndroming myself.] So I was basically talking about how I really wasn't very good and I was kind of wasn't very good at this and wasn't very good at that, blah, blah, blah. She looked at me, what are you doing? And I said, well, you know, I'm just, you know, being appropriately self-critical and making sure I don't get too big for my boots, basically. She just said to me, whatever that is, you'll need to stop it. You know, here in America, you need to be able to back yourself. And if you can't back yourself, no one's going to back you. And so when you rehearsed that kind of inner monologue outside, just like people think that you aren't worthy of investment. And it was sort of another one of those moments ago like, okay, that's a cultural phenomenon I hadn't quite put together. But it also again made me stop and think and say sometimes in my head and you know, maybe it's just me, but I kind of think it might not be. I hold a vision of myself from when I was 14 or 15, and I still, she's still who I think of myself as sometimes being awkward, shy, nerdy, a mass of red hair, really bad at sport. I got a whole series of it, too many words, still got those, and you know not kind of fitting in. And I realised both in that moment with my coach, in that moment with my colleague, that the vision I was holding in my head of myself and the way the rest of the world saw me, had a gulf in between them like a really big gulf, and that I needed to work on doing two things. One, as you say, starting to right size my inner critic or as I like to sometimes think, remind the 15-year-old that I'm not 15 anymore. And that in fact there's work to do to catch up to myself and to make sure that I can at least acknowledge that the way other people are seeing me isn't all of them being wrong.

**Shivani** [00:18:45] And speaking of work to do, you speak about leadership and I think I want to touch on some self-leadership aspects here because, you know, you've been to classes and been trained formally in so many forms. You've learnt leadership and strategy at Harvard and Wharton and Darden and Stanford, just to name a few but at the same time, it seems to be your mandate through what I've learned from you that being

in the room and reading and exposing yourself to this education simply isn't enough. And leadership is about three key things. What are they?

**Genevieve** [00:19:22] Heads, hearts and hands, every time, it's about how do you engage people in all the places that they live? How do you engage people with their heads, as in their thinking, their intellect, their reasoning, their rational activity? How do you engage people with the hands, pragmatically, hands-on doing things, making things? And then how do you engage people with their heart, with their emotions, with the places that matter to them? And I tend to think one of the things about most leadership training is that it does one and not the other two, and at any given point in time, it's any one of the three. And for me both in how I think about leadership, for myself, how I lead the school I now run, how we train our students up is to understand that it's all of those three things together, acting in concert, and that you have to be investing in each one of those pieces. And for me, it's very American language right, but you know, how you show up as a leader is about showing up with all of those pieces. It's about showing up having understood the facts of the place you find yourself in. But it's also about the pragmatics of it because, you know, organisations have ideals about how they are pragmatics about how they actually function and then how people feel about that. And for me, I think the my own leadership, I like to be paying attention to all three of those pieces and then investing and being attentive to each one of those pieces because they all require different kinds of work. And I guess, I mean, the other thing Shivani also, of course, they require different kinds of recovery. So being good about the heads piece, that's one kind of work. And when your head is full of words and ideas, it's a different sort of thing. You have to think about how do I get through to the other side of that? And the same with the heads and heart. So I just said, how they have different forms of recovery. So I said I was shy, I'm also an introvert, but like I said, I really like people. I like being around them and I love that part of my life. But I also know that means every now and again I'm just going to bed and not getting out for a day. And I'm taking a novel or bad television and maybe chocolate and possibly an ability to buy shoes online. And I'm not doing anything other than, just for a little while.

**Shivani** [00:21:26] I think my favourite part about that was the chocolate, my second favourite part, which probably should trump it, is the fact that you just acknowledged that rest and recovery is really important because of course, Genevieve, you're many things and one of those things is that you are the Director of the School of Cybernetics and you are on the board of the Commonwealth Bank of Australia, one of Australia's largest companies, one of Australia's biggest banks. I'd love to hear some insight on how your leadership journey got you there.

**Genevieve** [00:21:57] Look, I think part of the journey that got me through all the various places I've been was some other advice I was given when I was much younger, which was about saying yes to opportunities and then working out how to make them happen later, which was sort of a when doors open, you should walk through them and then work out what the consequences are of it later. So I have often just looked at something and said I should work out how to say yes to that. And I have had a tendency in my life to say yes to things where I thought again, I could make the world a better place, where I was going to be able to create room for others where I was pushed. So I tend to also be someone who likes to try things I haven't done before. All of which means actually my biggest challenge, Shivani, is usually managing my overwhelming desire to say yes to everything, because it all sounds incredibly interesting with having been done that for the fact that there's no time. So I joke about the fact that future Genevieve and present Genevieve don't speak to each other.

**Shivani** [00:22:49] A very important reminder and good advice there, Genevieve and speaking of advice here at Leading Women, we are committed to activating women's leadership. What other sage advice can you leave us with in this toolbox for leadership?

**Genevieve** [00:23:04] Oh, look, for me, I have this one thing I try to do, which is I try to make sure that I catch up with myself regularly. I know that sounds kind of a bit silly, but I try to make a time each year where I catch up to all the things I've accomplished in that year so that it doesn't just become a check box exercise. It's not just like, gosh, I was really busy this week or here are all the things I did, but I try to set a time in my calendar once a year where I look back at all the things I did in that year, and if I can't feel proud about it, I can at least integrate the amount of things I accomplished. And part of that for me means it means it gives me a capacity to show up in the next conversation and be a little bit closer to what other people see me as. So I think I describe it as the chasm between myself and how other people see me bridging that a little bit for me

involves making sure that I just spend a little bit of time, sitting with my own accomplishments. And you know, pragmatically, that tends to mean things like updating my resumé or my curriculum vitae, updating my LinkedIn page, which at the moment is grossly overdue for a tidy up and just making sure that I've had a moment to look at everything in its totality rather than in the oh my God, that's an hour of my life or that took a week to prepare for. So there's something about seeing things retrospectively, gives them a little bit more clarity and you can right size them and also accumulate them and get to say, I am the person who did those things and I should feel proud about that.

**Shivani** [00:24:33] Take out that time to relish in those achievements and more, Genevieve Bell, thank you so much for joining us here at Leading Women.

**Genevieve** [00:24:42] It was absolutely my pleasure. Thank you for having me.

**Julienne** [00:24:45] 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](http://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 [#leadingwomenaus](https://twitter.com/leadingwomenaus)

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