



Leading Women podcast
Commonwealth Bank Women in Focus

Episode 5: Tarsi Luo, Founder of Seed Planet and M&A Special Adviser

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Interviewee: Tarsi Luo

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Tarsi Luo, Founder of Seed Planet and M&A Special Adviser on navigating leadership through a cultural lens, balancing her Eastern identity with her Western environment and pushing forward no matter how many rejections you experience.

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

Shivani [00:00:34] Welcome to Leading Women, where we support your leadership journey, I'm your host, Shivani Gopal and today's episode is a vital conversation with vulnerability to shine the light on navigating leadership through cultural adversity. You'll absolutely love this chat with Tarsi Luo, a seasoned executive director and impactful CEO who's had a twist at every turn in her leadership journey. Migrating from China to Australia as a talented global marketing director, Tarsi was faced with two options: changing her name to mask her identity or starting her career again from scratch. In taking Option B, she has gone from zero to CEO in record time. Sharing how she faced a mirror with two reflections, Tarsi had to balance her Eastern identity with her Western environment. Her learnings: believe in yourself and push forward no matter how many rejections you experience. Enjoy, as we dive deeply into the concept that diversity is the new normal, to usher in a fresh era of leadership. Tarsi, a big welcome Leading women, tell me, where are you joining us from today?

Tarsi [00:01:54] Good morning, thank you for having me. I'm really thrilled to be here. I'm joining from Melbourne, Wurundjeri Country.

Shivani [00:02:01] Oh, wonderful and I have the great pleasure of joining you from Sydney and I'm on Gadigal land and really looking forward to this half hour with you. Tarsi, yours is an incredible leadership journey with a twist at every turn. Can you share with us your success path through adversity to here?

Tarsi [00:02:20] I love the phrase of twist at every turn. It's definitely a summary of my career so far. I was born in China in a small town in northern China, and both of my parents are factory workers, so they really just wanted me to have a normal life, married to a good man, have a good career, you know, in a small town like everybody else. I'm the little girl that who dreamed big and I really wanted something different. So I started my career in China as a very successful marketing director for a world leading drone company, which is very unusual already. It's, you know, for robots and all that stuff. Then I moved to Australia, started from a new industry, from a new role, from marketing to sales, really started from a sales rep to a CEO in six years.

Shivani [00:03:13] There is so much to explore there and I love that you carved your own take on what is a normal life. Your leadership journey on that in itself just wasn't a linear path. You're, of course, a very successful executive, but you did have challenging times where your expertise didn't translate from China to Australia. How did you navigate not being able to secure work?

Tarsi [00:03:39] That was the hardest transition that I ever had in my career so far. When I was in China I was very successful. So really on the top of the hill, every company wants to me to go in and lead their marketing events. I was very international, I was leading the teams in Europe, teams in the US so I had this utter confidence that I can do anything and I can do it anywhere. With that mindset, I thought, you know, come to Australia, a new country. There's so much more I can do. And the reality is it's very, very, very hard, very devastating at that time, to be honest, I just had my second baby. I could not find a job for six months. I filed thousands and thousands of applications. It's all rejections. There's no interview. It was just no hope at that time I felt, so my husband literally gave me two options. One is change your last name to his last name, which is English. So I have more chance to, you know, people to open my CV and to give that opportunity that I should be able to get interviews. Or the second option is forget the past, forget how glorious my past is just really thinking that you just graduated. You have no experience, you don't have university grade. What would you do in the new country? Start from a very bottom role. And I took the option two because I don't want to change my last name, even if I could. I felt like if people want to hire me, they hire who I am, not because of my race, not because my gender, not because you know everything else. It should be just be me. The person that they hired could do the job. I just literally chose option two. I forgot my past, you know, doesn't matter how successful I used to be, I start from zero. I took a sales rep role at that time. Even that role, I had five interviews, believe it or not, no one believed that I can do that job. But I appreciate the opportunity that I've had that lead to today, six years later, I'm a CEO.

Shivani [00:05:47] And six years later, you're the CEO. There's so much Adam Grant and Sheryl Sandberg in that advice. You know, I choose option B, I choose option two in your husband's advice case and you had two opportunities for a clean slate, you drew your own, but so much of that came from unexpected bias and hurdles. Can you tell me a little bit more about some of these hurdles that you didn't expect?

Tarsi [00:06:13] So, I mean, there are so many different hurdles in terms of looking for jobs, for example, to start with. And you've got people come to you and saying that maybe you should ask for this much because you're not experienced enough or you don't have a degree in this country or, you know, you're Chinese, you know, direct answers like that. Why? Why would you ask that much? So there's a lot of hurdles that I fight for. I literally sit, why can't I? You know, I have the knowledge I have the skill. I can do the job. So why can't I ask the same treatment? So there are a lot of those kinds of things happening in everyday, you know, jobs that I applied so different reactions to it as well.

Shivani [00:07:04] Goodness that is so confronting when your very identity is being thrown back at you as a hurdle because you are Chinese and yet we need more Chinese leaders. We need more diverse leaders so that we can actually identify as the diverse country that we supposedly are. Now, you've been through so much having to go through six months after being so incredibly experienced, but also so successful and so capable, and then coming here and hitting roadblock after roadblock. I imagine you've learned a lesson or two that you could share with us on resilience.

Tarsi [00:07:40] I think it's really keep in mind that you can do everything; you need that opportunity, so really believe in yourself. And sometimes a lot of people are saying that I'm so successful before, I've done this and that it doesn't really matter, in the end it is finding that just put your foot at the door, starting somewhere, giving that starting point to make you have the opportunity to accelerate your skill. And because of your goal, you will shine everywhere, right? So you got to make sure that you push yourself forward. Don't give up because everyone is saying no that means you are useless. It's really because they haven't seen you yet. So that's what I believe is, it doesn't really matter how much rejection I had, I can change a little bit of my CV, but doesn't change my personality because I believe I can do the job that's the strong belief in me.

Shivani [00:08:36] I can change my CV, but it doesn't change my personality that is a quotable right there from Tarsi Luo. Thank you for that massive nugget of gold. Now, along the way in building your strength and resilience and just backing yourself and I have so much yes and so much time for that. At the same time, you did have, as you've just said, a lot of naysayers, a lot of people saying, hey, you know, you can't expect that salary or you know, you're not going to get that role because you're Chinese. And in fact, you actually had people tell you to shrink back and conform and you decided to buck against that trend. What inner monologue did you have? What reflections can you share with us that made you fight those conformities?

Tarsi [00:09:23] So I think what I did in the current roles or, you know, in my past career is really putting myself, even though I had a very different, unique background I put myself similar with everybody else in this diverse country. So really, you know, I deserve everybody else's the same treatment and I endorse everyone else is doing the same. So really, sometimes I feel like the box and the glass ceiling or we still call it bamboo ceiling is we put ourselves rather than everybody else did it. So my advice is to really stick to who you are and just push forward.

Shivani [00:10:05] Yes, there's so much gold in that. And you know, I often say a version of that, which is confidence, is an act of equality. And I love how you just so beautifully articulated that we deserve to be equals because we are. And so we will behave exactly in that way and Tarsi, as a diverse leader myself, can I just share that I often find that people who don't support you haven't done so because they haven't been able to support themselves and probably haven't achieved those things themselves. So the best way to move forward is to role model it yourself, and you've done that for generations to come, Tarsi. So, so well done you. Let's take a different note because of course, there was so much adversity, there was so much resilience that had to come from within you. But thankfully that didn't last forever because there was a point where you were tapped on the shoulder to take on an ambitious role, like many of us women leaders are. And I'm sure at that time there was a lot going through your mind. Maybe some of it was, oh, goodness, can I do this? Should I do this? Tell me what made you say yes to take the opportunity?

Tarsi [00:11:10] So when I got the opportunity, I was thrilled to start with and then scared. I have never done a CEO before. I was always marketing director, sales director in my past way. CEO is a very different role. It's more comprehensive. It's people management, it's financials, it's legal, it's governance, there are so much things that I'm not aware of, you know, in the past career or I'm not great at yet. So very scary to think about that offer. And then that scariness happened, I would say lasted for a couple of hours. And they said, hey, it's a lifetime opportunity. I got to take it. If I don't take the opportunity, I won't learn. I want to see what's out there. It's like when I was in China. I've never imagined stepping out to China. I don't know what the world looks like to me, but here I am, traveled 18 countries and say I can do everything. I think it's the same mindset that come to push me to say, yes, you've never done that and you're probably have a very lucky experience or honestly, all your teams will be more senior than you, but they chose you because they believe in you and you can bring something back to this job as well. If I don't do the job, I will never see what's out there. So yes, that's pretty much my mindset and I was just like, I got to do it.

Shivani [00:12:38] You know what I love so much about that Tarsi is you didn't deny yourself any of those negative self-doubt feelings. You let it seep in, you felt it all. And then after a couple of hours, you went, well, you know what, despite all of that, I'm going to go ahead and I'm going to do it anyway. The interesting thing is, is you know, that women will generally not apply for roles unless they feel that they qualify for every single point on that JD, you know, short for job description, for example. And in your case, as you said, there was compliance, there was finance with all of these things that you didn't feel ready for, how did you prepare yourself to be successful in that kind of role, sort of flying the plane and building the plane at the same time by the sounds of things?

Tarsi [00:13:23] Yes that's absolutely right, so again, I think I'm very honoured or very thrilled to have the opportunity and people to believe me. And I think it come both ways. So for employees who are looking for jobs and especially for women, we shouldn't really just tick every single box because that's a wish list for the company wants to have. They want to have the best employee in the world. They want everything. But it's really hard to find the person who has everything. But you learn at the job and you learn along the skills that you have. I maybe not the best lawyer in the world. I couldn't or maybe should never be. But it doesn't stop me to understand the mindset of what is right or wrong and how do I find the best lawyer to support me to do the job, you know, to fight every single law case. I'm maybe not the best in numbers, but it's okay I can find the best CFO to support me along the journey. So I think I put this role more like leading and really putting all the great talent together and make them holding hands together to work together as a team and then to excel the results for the outcome for the business. On the other hand, I wanted to shout out for all the companies who are really looking, it is the mindset setting from the top because apart from you want the perfect employee work for you, but what can you bring for them as well. Do you really give them equal opportunities? Do you really step outside the comfort zone and say, hey, this person is on the, you know, developing, do you give them opportunity rather than say, I only want somebody who has 20 years experience? So I think it's both ways.

Shivani [00:15:05] I love the simplicity of that advice. You just learn on the job. And there was so much Richard Branson-esque in your advice as well. You don't need to be the best at everything. You just surround yourself with really good people who know what they're doing. Tarsi, I wonder if that also extends to your leadership team, because of course, you came in to a CEO role as a young CEO where most of your leadership team had many years of experience and probably more years in the industry than you did yourself. Yet you led that team so successfully. What was your blueprint around that?

Tarsi [00:15:40] I think to me, it is trust and transparency. I accepted and I meant that I'm not the most experienced CEO that you could ever find in this world. But then I put honesty and transparency to them that every direction I go, I tell them the reason why. And most people wanted to know the reason why rather than just do it. So my team really understands the why, what the company that we're building. We wanted to make it profitable. We want to make the brand last for a hundred years. Those are the principles. You know, the product that we create is for the best quality ever. So with that principles and we call it non-negotiables items and then we talk about how do we set a strategy for the business but with that, the team has their input, their expertise, their experience, their knowledge will build into that journey with me. I'm just the one just really driving the play, but they're the one making it happen.

Shivani [00:16:42] I love the term non-negotiables. It's so finite and it's something that we would just respect. What kind of non-negotiables did you have for your leadership journey?

Tarsi [00:16:54] So to me, it's the trust. As I said, come back to the transparency, everybody, how do I put this way is trust comes both ways, like I can open my heart to you. But if the people don't really trust the leadership and they give you feedback, you just ignore it. It never would have worked. It's really, as a leader, I ask for it and I have to push myself to go and beyond because you don't want to just sit in the chair and say, I want to trust and trust, but this doesn't come that way. You got to ask for it. You got to acknowledge it, and you got to really respect and accept it whether it's good or bad. You know, you can choose how you accept it the way how you accept it, but you got to really, really make sure that you action and you feedback, whether it's good or bad.

Shivani [00:17:47] It's so important, as you've said, trust and transparency and just to see it highlighted, it's got to work both ways because often female leaders, this can be a real tightrope. It can sometimes even be a poisonous chalice, because if you don't get it back on the other side, then you end up being far too vulnerable. You're the person who has overexposed yourself and overshared and you're just not getting it back. So how do you manage that in order to make sure that you can share your vulnerability, but someone else is also doing the same back for you?

Tarsi [00:18:20] That takes honestly and obviously different personality react different ways, there's no workplaces, not absolutely right or wrong. How do you define the trust? I had the, honestly the ups and downs. I've been, you know, putting a lot of faith in people. And then they failed me miserable as it was. So those experience and those examples happened but doesn't because you've been bit by a snake and you never going to trust people again, you got to keep going. You have to manage expectations. As female leaders, we always are being, a lot of people would describe when you are trying to be too open as emotional that's the words they'll say. Are you too emotional about stuff? But the thing is, it's really not. It's how you have a really kind heart, how you believe and your direction of the strategy and how you really act on it.

Shivani [00:19:18] Some sage advice there, I want to double down on some of this advice because, of course, you've become an incredibly successful executive and CEO at such a young age and there is no age for success, you know, you could be young or old, but managing to do it at a young age is always the dream. What advice do you have for other young leaders and young CEOs out there around some of the particular challenges that they face and how they may circumnavigate it?

Tarsi [00:19:45] It is really believing yourself. You will have doubts all the time. You will have those embarrassing moment that you just don't know it. And that is okay that is totally fine because you don't know, but that doesn't mean you can't pick it up and quickly know it. And the second time, don't make the mistake again that's what I would say because you know, no one is perfect. No one's going to make sure that I never make any mistakes. But when you make mistakes just accept it and honour it and don't make the same

silly mistakes twice. That's most important thing. And you got a life long time ahead of you. And where you think at this particular moment are you like, oh my God, this is really terrible and I've said something so silly and five years later that's nothing, really just pass on and really work on the next and how do you excel yourself and how do you lift your game up next time.

Shivani [00:20:43] You know, a great mentor once told me that if you screw up, take a step back and think, where does this really sit in the scheme of things? And it allows you to have some context and forgive yourself. And what I love about your advice is this freedom of, yes, you'll make mistakes, just don't make that same mistake the second time round, actually learn from it. There's a real sense of power within that task. There's so much more that I want to chat about. But there's this other area that I absolutely must explore with you, and that is this conflicting background that you would have no doubt have had from your own sense of identity and fierce ambition, but also the cultural background in which you've been brought up in and through your leadership journey from your work ethic to accepting awards and recognition that you may not have been comfortable with because of your cultural upbringing. Can you share with us your experience and vision around harnessing diversity when it comes to female leadership?

Tarsi [00:21:38] It is a very tricky one and hard one for me. In my whole life I would divide my life into half and half. So I was born and raised and educated in China so with all the great culture, Eastern culture. And then I worked most of the time in Australia and I traveled a lot of countries. I've seen a lot and so my working career is really Westernised. So I've been working with a lot of people from different backgrounds, so they give me a different mindset of the work ethic from different country. So it's really conflict information some time to myself as well. In my culture Eastern culture is all about being humble, being quiet, especially being a woman, should not be acting a certain way, should not speak up, should just accept what has been given to you. Do not negotiate. I've actually suffered a lot from that and sometimes it's kind of in my muscle memory that I automatically will go that way whenever there is issue or there is a negotiation. And I'll just like, oh, don't worry about it, just let it go and that leads to a lot of bad financial decisions in terms of career, you know, never negotiate a salary. I just don't know how. I don't even have the courage to ask the question, what is your range? I was so scared to ask those questions because of my cultural background, and then I guess along the way I kind of built that confidence. But still those kinds of influence will, not suffering in terms of financial but also in some of the strategic decisions that I'm making, I'll be like, well, is my board going this way? Is the executive leadership going that way? So, you know, I always put a, it's like I being a mom, you think about everybody else before yourself but I've also developed another piece of me. The Western side of my side is really to forget about the surrounding, thinking about what is most important for the business. So if I'm in this seat right now, today, I'm leading this business, the business financial, the business outcome and the business people is my priority. Everything else comes second. So if I do this, how do I support these people in this company? How do I make this business profitable? How do I grow the revenue? So then I really put this focus up and make sure that my adjustment, based on my experience and my executive leadership experience that would push the right strategy forward. So I will stand up to argue with people who is not buying. I'll stand up to argue and speak up why the reason I would do this. So there's no perfect answer to the question. I would really, I'm still suffering till today with my both Eastern and Western cultural background. I'm still tied in the ropes every day, but I finding myself stronger and stronger every single day because I'm really trying to push the boundaries and make sure that I have this goal in what I believe is right.

Shivani [00:25:05] It sounds like you've certainly found a way around it, a mirror with two reflections, if you will, you know, your Chinese self and then your Western self, as you put it. And I'm so glad that you think about things in the term of what is best for the business, because what is also best for the business is that the executive who leads the business, the CEO who leads the business is well remunerated because after all, money is the universal currency of value. And if you don't ask for your worth, you're effectively saying you don't value yourself. And so I'm so glad that you found a way around that. I'd love to end now with a closing question around how we can together activate women's leadership, because, of course, we are committed to that here at Leading Women. Tell me what tool has ignited your leadership that you can share with us for the Leadership Toolbox?

Tarsi [00:25:54] To me, all my experience and all my journey so far is do not, never doubt yourself. Believe in yourself and push yourself forward. It doesn't matter, rejections, millions or trillions, just push yourself forward and believe.

Shivani [00:26:14] No matter how many rejections, push yourself forward and just believe. Sage advice from Tarsi Luo. Tarsi, thank you so much for joining us at Leading Women today.

Tarsi [00:26:24] Thank you for having me.

Julienne [00:26:26] 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

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