



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

Episode 4: Louise Adams on the power of visibility for leading in a new era.

**Hosted by: Shadé Zahrai
Interviewee: Louise Adams**

Featuring: Jinny Olney, Head of Women in Focus, CommBank

This episode, Shadé Zahrai interviews Louise Adams, Chief Executive – Australia and New Zealand of Aurecon. She is also a Mentor of the Minerva Network, National Advisory Board Member of Infrastructure Partnerships Australia, Member of Chief Executive Women and Board Director of Aurecon Australasia.

Jinny [00:00:03] Welcome to Leading Women, your place to share and celebrate real stories and access the tools and resources you need to activate your leadership. I'm Jinny Olney, Head 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 are here. Enjoy this episode as we redefine the business landscape together.

Shadé [00:00:32] Welcome to Leading Women, the place to ignite your leadership and elevate equality. I'm your host, Shadé Zahrai, and today's conversation is a call to action not just for leaders, but for us all to firmly believe in our "why" and what a pleasure to welcome Louise Adams, an authentic and collaborative leader who creates a followership with her team of thousands. Louise candidly shares how her leadership journey started by default until she decided to drive it by design, the power of being visible and the leadership style for the new era. Thanks so much for joining us on Leading Women, Louise, dialing in from Melbourne.

Louise [00:01:16] Thanks, Shadé, it's a pleasure to be with you here today and I'm really looking forward to our conversation.

Shadé [00:01:21] Me too, I can't wait. So, Louise, you have a great story of your remarkable leadership journey. Could you share your path to how you got to where you are now?

Louise [00:01:30] Yes, look, I feel that my leadership journey started out quite accidentally, to be honest. I was working with Aurecon, the company that I still work with. I've been with them for 20 odd years, and I was a graduate in our Adelaide office. And the one passion that I had was to travel. So I really knew I wanted to link up my career with my ability to travel. So I guess, I said to a few people in the office that I wanted to have some opportunities somewhere else and travel with the work. And so one day I got tapped on the shoulder and one of the directors said to me that they wanted to open an office up in far north Western Australia and they wondered if I would go off and do that for them. And so at that point, it was just opening an office. There weren't any people in the offices. It was just going to be me. But we had quite a bit of success with the office. And so I guess as the office grew, I grew with it. And I had plenty of opportunity to lead people, I employed people. We got the office up to about 22 people. So what had started out as a very early career move ended up as a leadership position quite early on in my career. And then from there, I guess that set the tone for a lot of my career. I then went on and just jumped at opportunities when they presented to me and that took me overseas. After I had spent some time in Western Australia, I headed over to the UK and had a number of opportunities over there and then ended up in the UAE. I will say, as well as jumping at all opportunities, I had a fair bit of luck on the way. We moved to the UAE from the UK. I had met my now husband in the UK and he had an opportunity to go and work out in Dubai. And so I knew that we had an office out in the UAE and the guy that ran it, I knew him. So I sent him a note and said, you know, any jobs going but I'd prefer to be in Dubai than Abu Dhabi, which is where our office was. And I still remember he wrote back to me maybe a couple of hours later and said that he'd been on a conversation that morning with the board who'd approved us opening an office in Dubai. And he was sitting there wondering who would get to lead it. And my email dropped in his email box. So I do believe in luck and I do think I've been quite fortunate in that regards. So from there, I had a number of leadership opportunities in Dubai eventually leading our offices across the UAE. And that was probably when I got to a point in my career where, you know, it's probably the first time that I had felt a little bit stagnant in my leadership career. I was starting to wonder what leadership meant and what good leadership looked like. And it was the time that Aurecon went through a transition of leadership. We got a new CEO in and that really reignited and bought a

little bit of a renewed drive into me from a career perspective. And he gave me a lot of different perspectives about what leadership was. And that's when I guess I stopped being, stopped having that accidental opportunity where I would just jump on any opportunity that came to me and sort of started to think, no, I need to start to create opportunities for myself. And I was fortunate enough off the back of my relationship with him and a few of the other senior leaders in the business to then be given an opportunity to come back to Australia. So I moved my family back to Australia here, took on one of our largest businesses being the South Australian and Victorian business, and ran that for a few years. And then my boss at that time who was running Australia and New Zealand, he stepped up into the global CEO role and he gave me the role that I'm currently in, which was leading Australia and New Zealand. So it's been a very interesting leadership journey. I've been very fortunate to be able to get so many different experiences out of the same organisation, and it's been very enjoyable with some distinct turning points along the way.

Shadé [00:05:16] And you've got so much in there. You touched on turning points, but this idea of serendipity and being in the right place at the right time, but then also taking action. So not just sitting back and letting things happen when an opportunity arises, you were so open and willing to just jump right in and see what was next. Now, Louise, I just love your story of accidental leadership, which you've just taken us through, and your courage to really share that and own that, because I'm sure that so many leaders will be nodding along and feeling less alone on their journey too. You speak about these powerful "what now" moments, which you just started to touch on. And there when you, I guess, you really question what's the right next move for you? And I guess when you really focus on what is the right next move for me that's when you can make sure that your leadership is by design rather than just by default. So can you tell us a little more about your "what next" moment?

Louise [00:06:07] Yes, look, I think I just started to think about what was the end game, you know, I had so many opportunities where I had the opportunity had been given to me and I had just jumped in two feet, really not knowing where I was heading, but thinking this is going to be a great opportunity and I'm going to go and make the most of it. [00:05:55] So I think I started to then think, well, I'm at a point in my career where I'd like to think I know enough about where I wanted to be, what I aspired to be, where I wanted to be in, say, 10 or 15 years. And so that was probably my "what next" moment. I thought to myself, I've got enough experience and I've got enough connections and networks and reputation that I could probably start to rather than just taking in the opportunities as they come to me, start to design opportunities and create opportunities for myself in areas that I wanted them to be. And in particular, always having one eye on what that endgame that I wanted to create was and what sort of experiences that I really needed to collect along the way to get there. And so it was probably really taking my own leadership journey and rather than just sort of sailing along wherever it took me really start to say, no, I'm going to grab this bull by the horns and take it where I would like it to go. [56.3s] And I think you can do that at any point in your career. And for me, it just seemed right at that point in time. And it was, as I said earlier, when we got our new CEO and he really taught me a lot about what leadership was in and of itself and how important leadership is. And that probably was a bit of a pivotal point for me as well, because he really made me understand that you don't suddenly wake up at a point in your career and say, I'm a leader, and therefore I have all of the suite of tools and experiences and skills to be a leader that leadership in and of itself is this ongoing lifelong learning journey and that you should always challenge yourself to become a better leader and to look at everything that's happening in the world around you and look for opportunities to learn and improve in the skill of being a leader in itself.

Shadé [00:08:13] You're so right. I love how you highlighted that leadership is not a destination. You're not going to wake up one morning and think, hey, I'm a leader. It's actually a lifelong process and it's about being open to the experiences and really acknowledging also the skills and the qualities that you have developed from the beginning of your career. It's not that you just reach that point and you suddenly feel more capable. It really is that ongoing process. And you shared with us offline about how it's so important to really be teaching yourself new tricks and opening your mind to new ways of doing things. And we know from the year where the whole world was shaken by the pandemic about how important it is to adapt leadership and to adapt the approach that may have once worked but no longer does because you're navigating a virtual environment or navigating all of these additional pieces of the puzzle that weren't there before.

Louise [00:09:06] Yes, look, I think that's particularly important. And I think that the last year has taught us and we'll continue to teach us just how important it is. I think in the past, leaders have perhaps tended to hold expectations of themselves or perhaps other people held expectations of leaders that leaders naturally know the answers to everything. And I just think when we live in such a fast changing, evolving world that can be disrupted and is constantly disrupted by it by technology or by the circumstances the world's found itself in the last 12 months that leaders need to be able to show that vulnerability, to show that it really is impossible for one person to have the answers to everything. And at the end of the day, a leader needs to be able to, I love a quote that I've heard before,

which is leaders need to take people where they ought to go, not necessarily where they want to go. But I think leaders at the same time need to be open to whether or not they know where people ought to go and how do they work out where people ought to go. And that can be about working closely with teams or as you say, just having that mindset of every day when you wake up, what else can I learn? What podcast can I listen to? What can I read in the media? What can I read in the news or who can I talk to in the organisation that perhaps just has a slightly different view of the world than I do so that you can always grow in your mindset and your understanding of the challenges. And also, I do think listening to people within your organisation is important, having empathy for what people do. And I think particularly with the digital disruption that's going on, a lot of the times, if you were to go back 20, 30, 40 years, you would find that leaders of organisations, often their skill sets involved them coming up through an organisation and having experience in doing what everybody in that organisation did. So you'd end up with leaders, you know, it's a bit like the typical army approach to leadership. I know what you need to do because I've been there and I've done that before. I think nowadays, with the size of organisations and the complexity and often the multidisciplinary nature of organisations, it's very rare for you to have a leader that actually can look at everybody in the organisation and say, I've done what you've done. Add to that the fact that you're introducing technology at such a rate, you're often as a leader, going to be asking people to do things that you really haven't had to do yourself. So the impetus there is for you to deeply understand what that means to them, the impact that might have on them. They will often be stepping well out of their comfort zones so have the empathy, find out what it's like, and connect deep into the organisation to understand the impact of the decisions you're making and the leadership that your journey that you're taking people on.

Shadé [00:11:56] I love that. Have the empathy, find out what it's about and really be open to shifting perspectives. So, Louise, you've touched on the influence of leadership a few times. And of course, as leaders, we influence the people that we lead. Now, for you, that's over 4,000 employees and obviously the responsibility of that ripple effect into their families and their communities. No pressure, of course, but there are also leaders who have inspired and influenced you. And, of course, there's a number of people that we never even know that we're influencing in what we do each and every day. So I'd love to hear why it matters to you that you're an authentic and visible leader to influence others in ways that will enhance them.

Louise [00:12:35] Yes, I think it's really important for me. I think this authenticity piece and I think it will continue to become incredibly important in leadership. I often reflect on the fact that I am incredibly passionate about what my organisation Aurecon does, and particularly the field of engineering, which is my background. You know, it's very difficult to drive around a city or to go anywhere really in this world and not see the impact that engineers have on our communities and, you know, all the infrastructure and everything that we utilise day in, day out and combined with the fact that we have these very complex challenges facing the world at the moment around climate change and sustainability and urbanisation and food and energy and water security that we really need engineers to step up and start to help us solve those problems. So there's a great deal of purpose in what we as an organisation do. And I think that's what attracts people to want to come and work with us. And so I think as a leader, you know, showing that you have that passion and being authentic that everything that you're trying to do as a leader plays into that passion and that outcome that you're trying to drive as an organisation is very important. I think certainly post 2020 and even before that we were starting to see this ongoing trend where people and communities were standing up to corporations and saying, we expect you to stand for more than just profit. And I think, therefore, there's a lesson to be learnt for leaders that you really have to find. What is your passion? Why is it that you get out of bed every day? And perhaps ask yourself if it is just to make money, then, you know, you probably always going to struggle to inspire people and to get the followership out of people. And this concept of followership, I think, is really important to me as well. I think it's a privilege to be able to lead people. I think that it's important to recognise that there are a lot of choices out there for people they can choose to follow, whomever they like. So it's a privilege when people choose to follow you. And I think they do so off the back of that deep authenticity. I have certainly had a lot of people who have influenced my career journey, a lot of sponsors and mentors along the way that have given me a lot of support. As I've said, I've stayed in the same organisation for most of my career and been very fortunate in that respect. And that has given me the ability to make really strong networks, not only within the organisation, but around the industry. And I've leaned on those to make steps in my leadership journey and to get opportunities and to open doors and sort of built a reputation off the back of, you know, people talking about me, I guess, and saying, well, this is what she's known for. This is what I know she'll do, or you should support her or you should get onside with her because she can, you know, she can deliver and she's a good leader and she can give you a good outcome. So I think that combination, and particularly for me in a male dominated industry as a female and there are very few of us in the industry at the level at which I see it, having those sponsors and a lot of the time and certainly for me, those sponsors and those mentors were men in my career, very important that they could stand up and be vocal advocates for my leadership journey.

Shadé [00:16:02] And one thing I want to highlight, which I think is so important, is you were mentioning the fact that because you've been within the company for so long, you've developed this depth of relationship and this real trust that people see you as being a leader who can deliver. And, you know, when we think about personal brand, one of the quotes I love from Jeff Bezos, he says that your brand is what people say about you when you leave a room. And it highlights the importance of, you know, really doing your time in a particular space. I think we see a lot of young people who are really driven and ambitious and they want to keep moving and growing and they're constantly thinking what's next without really thinking about, okay, where am I now and how can I demonstrate that I can deliver here and now so that I'm developing the skills and the track record to then be ready to move on to whatever the next step is for me. What are your thoughts on that?

Louise [00:16:54] Yes, look, I think it's really important and I agree with you and I mentor a lot of young people and it is a big piece of advice that I often give. You know, when you look at a CV, which is a reflection of the experiences that you have in your career and you think of that CV as being the report card, I guess that can open opportunities for you. You've got to really appreciate the depth of the CV comes from actually exactly as you say, making the most of those opportunities. And so I often give the advice to young people that I mentor to sort of hasten slowly, like they always have this desire. So I remember mentoring one young individual in our organisation who said to me, who I'd been helping for a while, and they had just got this opportunity. They just got this new role and they sort of came straight away and said to me, well, okay, I've just got that role. So now I want to talk about what the next step is. And I sort of had to say to them, well, the next step is to prove yourself in that role. The next step is to take every opportunity that role affords you and to actually squeeze every positive piece that you can or positive lesson or even negative lessons out of that experience that you can in order to prepare yourself for that next career step. And I think it is important because, as you say, people will judge you not on the title that you have, but on what you do whilst you sort of take that nametag. And certainly in my career, my current boss, our global CEO, Bill Cox, I've had many conversations with him over the last few years since he brought me back into Australia, where he'll be doing a performance review with me. And he will, he often has said to me that one of the things that always stood out for him and why he finds it so easy to continually give me opportunities and to advance my career is because he says, you just get on with it. You kind of just get on with the job and you prove yourself. And then, you know, you're very willing to have conversations about where your career might go in the future. But it doesn't ever take away from the fact that right now you're in this role and you're going to get on and you're going to deliver in that role. And I do think that is incredibly important. And the other piece of advice that I often give to young people who are in a bit of a hurry because let's not kid ourselves. I was always in a hurry when I was a young, you know, through the earlier years of my career, I was always wondering what's next, what's the next big thing? But the other piece of advice that I often give to people is I call it one up leadership. There is always an ability for you to, regardless of what role you sit in, is to look up at your line manager, look up at the managers around you, whether it's your project manager or whoever is in roles that you aspire to be in and really take the opportunity to understand what is it that they're worried about? What does success look like for them? What are their challenges? And even in your role, go and have a conversation to them about what you might be able to do to help them succeed and to help create opportunities for them or to help them with their challenges. Because, you know, there are benefits from that in both directions. You'll get additional experience. You'll get perhaps a little bit of an opportunity to experience a role that you aspire to before you actually get into that role. And then secondly, particularly if they are your line manager or your boss or something, there's nothing to be lost from making their life easier.

Shadé [00:20:25] No, I'm sure they'd love you for it. And it ties into the piece around empathy that you touched on earlier around you can demonstrate empathy in a leadership capacity in terms of thinking about what is someone else going through? What are their challenges? And then again, to your point, asking yourself what value or what service can I offer them? How can I help them? Because at every point I think one of the things that holds so many, especially women back, is that we were often thinking, well, I'm not ready. I don't know enough. I haven't been enrolled for long enough. I don't have the skills. And we focus on what we don't have and what we lack as opposed to reflecting on, well, what do I bring to the table and how can I really leverage those? One other piece I just want to highlight is you touched on the importance of knowing where you want to go. So having clarity, you mentioned you always knew what your 10 or 15 year vision was going to be, especially at that "what now" moment. But you were still, one, I was there and the other I was on the okay, what do I need to do right here and right now to continue to deliver. To make sure that I'm doing what I can to bring the best out of the people, which is such a powerful approach to have, because then you never forget your way and your purpose, but you are present and you're able to actually have the impact that you know, you can have. Now, Louise, you did share with us a story offline as well, which I think would be lovely to explore about the experience you had on your global board. Can you share that one with us?

Louise [00:21:50] Yes, look, again, very grateful to Aurecon for all the opportunities they've given me. But back in 2013, they asked me to step onto their global board, which was a hell of an opportunity for me. And it was really as

part of a transition that Aurecon was going through, really transitioning from having a management board to having a true governance based board. And I got the opportunity to stand on that board as an executive director. And I, very soon after stepping onto that board, became pregnant. And so I had a conversation with my boss at the time and agreed that I was going to take maternity leave from my day job, from my operational job, which is at that time was running the UAE as the country manager, and that I would stay connected through the business by staying and continuing to represent on the global board because it wasn't a day job. It didn't mean that I had to be doing stuff every single day. But we did get together quarterly in person. And one of those meetings was always in Australia and the other meeting was in South Africa. And then there are sort of two floating meetings where they would choose the destinations. Now we were probably midway through the year. And I had my due date. And I remember ringing the chair of the global board and saying to him, look, here's the facts, I'm due in October and our board meeting, which I think was meant to be in New Zealand, is in November. And therefore, I'm not going to be able to make it to the board meeting. I won't be able to travel that quickly. It's going to be too far to travel logistically. We can't make it work. And I said to him, so I just wanted to give you an early heads up that I don't mind if I dial-in or we can work through it other ways, but I'm not going to be able to travel. And I still distinctly remember he said to me, look, just give me half an hour and I'll give you a call back. And so about half an hour later, he called me back and he said, well, we've moved the meeting. We'll bring it to Dubai, which is where I was based at the time. He said, we're going to travel and we'll relocate the meeting to Dubai because we want to give you the most opportunity to be involved in it. And he said, you know, whether or not you can attend, we'll have to take it at the time. And depending on how you're feeling and how you're going, and there'll be no pressure, but the opportunity will be there for you. And I really think that's the other flipside of this whole piece around leadership is, you know, there are some organisations that have transitioned to this new world. And this is where I really have learnt my leadership, empathy, authenticity, all of these things. And so if you are with the right organisation, you should be able to get the right opportunities for yourself. But recognising that, I think there are a number of really great companies out there, companies that will do exactly that, that will sit there and say, right, we're willing to change the location and get an entire global board to shift where they're travelling to for the benefit of, at that time, I was their only female director. So it meant a lot to them that was something they were passionate about so they made it happen.

Shadé [00:24:46] And it's really reassuring to know that there are companies and people out there who will make things like that happen, because no doubt one of the concerns a lot of women have is around choices that they make in their life, whether it is to become a mother, whether it is to do something else, take a risk, and not sure of what impact that's going to have on their career. But again, highlighting the importance of making sure that you have a track record of delivery, having that really strong brand behind you, because that's how you can then gain the sponsors and those who really want to make things work for the sake of your journey. So, Louise, with all of your leadership experience, nothing could have prepared you or any leader on the planet for 2020. With many thousands of people looking to you for your leadership in adversity, what was this like for you and what wisdom and insight did you gain from that time?

Louise [00:25:35] Yes, 2020, I think it's going to go down as the most challenging year in most people's professional careers, if not personal lives. And I think what's really resonated for me and as you said, if you're a leader that's got to front up every day and have thousands of people looking to you for leadership during times of crisis, I think for me it really is that piece around being authentic and knowing what your "why" is. And I think it would be pretty draining if you're a leader. If you didn't have that "why", if you really didn't have that purpose to have to turn up every single day and provide leadership to the masses and in that authenticity, a willingness to be able to be quite open that you won't always have the answers. You know 2020, there are very few people that will say they've had more challenging times and certainly many more businesses. So not being out of that "why" for me, as I said earlier, the real drive, the impact that we as an organisation had and can continue to have and the government made a huge investment into infrastructure. So it was easy to isolate our "why" and to say we've got a job to do here, not only continuing to create great infrastructure outcomes for communities, but also to provide ongoing employment and to sort of re-boost that economy. So really understanding your "why" and being able to put it front and centre for you each and every day that you wake up. And I don't think, I think also what we've learnt in this period and as we move forward is that the leadership styles that worked in the last 10, 20, 30, 40, 50 years, it's not appropriate leadership to take us where we need to go for the next decade. I remember a few years ago talking to my uncle who had stepped out of, you know, day-to-day operational C suite level roles in his career and was now a director on a board. And one of the boards that he was on, they asked him to step back in to be the CEO of one of the companies he was a director for because they had a gap to fill for six months. And I remember he rang me one day and he said to me, I don't know how you do it nowadays. I really just how do you get people to do what you want them to do? And I said, I don't know what you mean. Like, what did you used to do? And he said, well, you just used to tell them what to do and they did it. And that really struck a chord for me because and it goes to this concept of followership and the fact that you need to earn the right to be able to have people follow you. So I think for me, authenticity is really important and it's incredibly

important when you're trying to lead people through adversity and through crisis. And so really knowing what your "why" is and having a reason insight for yourself to get up and to show the resilience and strength and day in, day out leadership that that your people are going to be looking for. You know, you need to have a purpose behind that.

Shadé [00:28:32] Such a powerful lesson, to earn the right to have people to follow you and that's by being authentic and leading with your "why". And with the passion and resilience that comes with it. So, Louise, as you know, at Leading Women, we're committed to activating women's leadership, our unique impact is that each amazing guest offers a tangible tool that's ignited their leadership for us to add into our leadership toolbox to elevate equality and redefine our business landscape. So what are you adding for us today?

Louise [00:29:01] I think in terms of tangible tools, and it certainly is the one that I used myself and I've mentored a lot of young professionals to use it. It really went back to that point in time where I went from having that accidental leadership journey to being a bit more specific about where I wanted to go. And it was as simple as sitting there and saying, where do I want to be in 10 years? What sort of CV would I need to have to get that job that I want in 10 years? And then comparing it with my CV on the day with the CV that I needed in 10 years and looking for the gaps and saying, well, what are the career opportunities that I need to go and create for myself to make the ideal CV that I'm going to put on the table in 10 years to get that ultimate outcome that I want. So that was a fairly tangible tool that I've used. And I've heard others have picked up and used quite effectively. And I think the other one really goes to that piece around creating networks and having mentors. People, particularly in hierarchical organisations, can get stuck with the line management chain and think that if I want to go anywhere, I just have to talk to my line manager and it's up to them to decide whether or not I can have that opportunity. If you are very good, you're putting your line manager in a hell of a conflicted space because they won't want to get rid of you. So also recognising that whilst you do have to have that conversation, you also should create networks and luck can come into it. So if you go and say to somebody, if you shout quite loudly and proudly about where you want to go and what opportunities you want, then they're front of mind, when somebody has got to make a decision as to who they might give that opportunity, it's never a bad place to be.

Shadé [00:30:35] I love it. Luck comes into place, but you've got to take the action first.

Louise [00:30:38] Absolutely.

Shadé [00:30:39] Wonderful. Well, Louise, thank you so much for spending your time with us and sharing so many wonderful gems of insight. Your personal experiences are so interesting, wonderful stories, I'm sure women on the journey are going to love listening to you and continue to follow your journey.

Louise [00:30:56] Thanks so much. It's been really enjoyable to sit here and have the chat with you and continue the chats that we've had today. Leadership is an intriguing subject and I really do enjoy my leadership journey and hope that it will continue for many more years.

Shadé [00:31:14] What a thought provoking conversation with Louise reminding us that leadership isn't a destination that you suddenly arrive at, first it's a commitment and then a lifelong journey. Looking forward to you joining us next episode. Until then, share this episode with the women leaders, you know, and let's activate leadership together.

Jinny [00:31:35] Thanks for listening to Leading Women where we can all activate leadership 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 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)