



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

Episode 5: Judith Barker, CEO, St John Ambulance Australia (NT) Inc. on actionable insights and the crucial role that empathy plays.

**Hosted by: Rebekah Campbell
Interviewee: Judith Barker**

Featuring: Julienne Price, Executive Manager Women in Focus

Judith shares actionable insights and the crucial role that empathy plays, the power of saying yes and how leadership can come from anyone at any time in the workplace.

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.

Rebekah [00:00:34] Welcome to Leading Women, the place to ignite your leadership and redefine the business landscape. I'm your host, Rebekah Campbell, and in this invaluable episode with Judith Barker, CEO at St John Northern Territory, we discuss actionable insights and leading emergency services and in crisis environments that we can all apply to business. She shares the crucial role empathy plays, the power of saying yes and how leadership can come from anyone at any time in the workplace. Hi, Judith, thanks so much for joining us today. I'm so excited for our conversation. Whereabouts are you joining us from?

Judith [00:01:15] Morning, Rebekah, I am joining you from sunny Darwin in the Northern Territory and really huge thanks for having me on.

Rebekah [00:01:22] I'd like to start with a question that I ask all of our guests, which is to outline your unique leadership journey. So how did you start and where are you today?

Judith [00:01:30] I started almost 25 years ago on this particular leadership journey, and I started in WA working for the ambulance service there as a paramedic. And when I started, I think I started with the mindset that I was always going to be a paramedic. Obviously, I was passionate about ambulance and today I still work within ambulance service. But as I became more confident and as I grew as a paramedic, I realised that for me, I needed challenge and change and new learnings to keep me stimulated and interested. And so whereas I used to think I wasn't a person who would change easily or like to be disrupted in what I do, it turns out I was really wrong and I just started saying yes to any opportunities that came my way. Some of it I enjoyed and some of it I didn't. So my first opportunity was training new paramedics and being a mentor. And while I loved the mentoring, I've decided that education is not my strength. And I really admire people who can get up and stand in front of a classroom and teach. But it's not for me. But if I hadn't said yes to the opportunity, I wouldn't know that. And so I just started plugging away and having a look at the positions around me and the sort of things those positions and people got to do, what interested me, what I felt worked. And then I started matching my education to where I wanted to go and picking up all the opportunities, both in my job and outside of my job that would grow my skills.

Rebekah [00:03:06] And now you're CEO of St John Northern Territory. What does your day look like? What does it take to be the CEO?

Judith [00:03:12] I think what I like is no two days are the same. And so you can come in and do a routine day full of meetings and emails and papers or go out and network, or you can come in and have to manage a crisis such as what happened to everyone last March with Covid, where that crisis becomes all consuming. So no two days are the same and they're filled with highs and lows. They're filled with mundane things and they're filled with some really exciting meaty problems that you get to sink your hands into.

Rebekah [00:03:48] I want to go through your leadership journey that you spoke about and kind of unpick it bit by bit and the different things that you learnt along the way. So I start by going back 25 years to, you know, you first doing your training. Well, first off, what was it about becoming a paramedic? Why did you choose that as your career path?

Judith [00:04:06] I never grew up wanting to be a paramedic and I think I always saw health as something I wasn't capable of. And perhaps that's because my dad was a paramedic. And so he would come home at the end of the day and he would tell us about his day and what he'd had to face. And I couldn't see myself doing that. I couldn't put myself in his shoes and see that I could manage all of the things that I thought he was really brave for doing. So when I left high school, I went to university. I got an English literature degree because I like to read. But, you know, a Bachelor of Arts doesn't always translate into a real-life job. And so I sort of just worked in sales for a few years. And then one day I was driving behind an ambulance in Vic Park in WA and I went, you know, I can do that. And everything I was searching for in a job that had a purpose and a job that wasn't in an office, despite that's where I ended up now, but a job that really helped people and had social good. I realised that being a paramedic was that for me. And so without telling my family, or my parents, I put in an application. My dad found out pretty quick because he was also the boss, not just a paramedic, he was the boss. But I decided I would give it a go and if I got the job, it meant that that was where I was meant to be. And if I didn't get the job that meant that I was probably right and health wasn't for me. I decided to leave it in fate's hands.

Rebekah [00:05:33] And so you'd heard all about what being a paramedic was like from your dad, from his experiences coming home and telling you. When you got to the job, what was it like? Was it what you imagined?

Judith [00:05:43] Everybody says to me, I couldn't do your job. I couldn't do the blood and the gore. And yes, there is a lot of trauma in the work that paramedics do. But you are so well trained as a paramedic in how to deal with trauma, how to treat injuries, what medications to give that when you rock up to something that's traumatic, when you rock up to a fatality that training just kicks in. So everyone imagines that's the hard bit and it's not because you've been trained to respond. What is the hard bit is all the emotion and the heartbreak that goes around those scenes. So things that really stick with me and might still flashback or things that smells set off and smells are a strong one. It's not the person and the injury; it's the emotion of the family around it or the emotion of the event. And that's something, you know, I was 23 at the time that's something that they can't teach you. They can't give you life experience and that's the hardest part of the job when you first start out.

Rebekah [00:06:50] Sounds so hard, is there anything that you think that you had innately that made you well suited?

Judith [00:06:56] It probably wasn't something that I particularly knew I had but when they select you to become a paramedic, there is a lot of focus on who you are as a person. So there's a lot of testing, there's often a psychologist or someone on the panel and they're looking for someone who has empathy, who has resilience, who has quick decision-making skills and can make decisions under pressure. So there's all of these innate abilities and skills and who you are as a person that when you go to become a paramedic that's what they're looking for, that they can grow and develop or you can grow and develop in your career. But you need to have it to start with. And I remember going for my interview and having one of the questions be, can you tell us about empathy and what does empathy mean versus sympathy? And right from the start, that's what they were looking for even 25 years ago.

Rebekah [00:07:52] Having those innate skills must really support your leadership now you're leading such a large team of others as well. You said at the beginning you went in and you just wanted to be a paramedic

and help people and then you saw other opportunities to grow and maybe to contribute more. Can you tell us a bit about what drove you to seek out and chase those opportunities?

Judith [00:08:14] I think when you're a paramedic, you can go to people on the worst day of their lives and you can help them at that point. And it's a fantastic feeling and a fantastic high when you can contribute to something. But I realise that as great as that is, I wanted to be able to change systems and have a broader health impact and a broader impact on people's lives. So I chose positions where I could influence change and where I could have that impact. So one of the first positions I chose was a health systems position where I was going to have an impact on patient flow and ramping so even 20 years ago that was a problem. And I really wanted to figure out what was going on and how we could impact and change that for the better for everyone. So I looked at one position at a time, one step at a time, and when I became comfortable in a position and when I felt I'd started to shift things and I'd had an impact, and usually that was about the three-year mark. Then I looked for the next opportunity to have an impact because I knew that after three years, while I couldn't do a job perfectly and there was more to contribute, that me personally, I needed to move on to something new and something challenging.

Rebekah [00:09:38] That's such a great point though, I want to call out though, is what drove you to look for greater opportunities was looking at your strengths, your innate strengths and where you could make the most impact with those strengths. You do start moving up and you get one role after another, which eventually leads you to CEO. And I know what you looked for, but did you always feel like you had all of that kind of prerequisite experience to go for the next stage up? Or how was it that you put yourself in that position?

Judith [00:10:08] They often talk about if men can do 50% of the job description, they jump at it but women want to have, they want to tick every box on that job description before they give a role a chance. And really, you're not doing yourself any favours because you can already do the job, so what are you going to learn and what are you going to contribute? So I loved any time I got a relieving opportunity or a secondment opportunity that gave me a chance to try before I could buy. And so my last job was not something I ever thought I would do. It was critical infrastructure, it was I.T., it was data, it was all of this stuff that I had nothing to do with beforehand. But there was a chance to do it for six months. And I'd sort of started working with the team on a project that I got selected to run, which was about evidence-based change through data and I almost failed maths in high school, so it never, it would never occur to me that I would enjoy it, but I did. And so when the opportunity came to do the job for six months, while they recruited, I went, sure, why not? So I chose to go and work for someone that, quite frankly, terrified me beforehand. But it was just because they were so competent and so sure of themselves and I thought; how am I going to live up to this? But I took a deep breath and I bit the bullet and it was the best opportunity. And I worked with the most amazing people. And I think it reinvigorated me to know that it was the different and the change and the challenge. And I asked lots of questions and I listened a lot. And it was just what I needed at the time and that definitely set me on my path to become a CEO for sure.

Rebekah [00:11:50] Sounds like you took the next opportunity, even if you felt like you might not have had all the experience or it might not be what you're necessarily good at, you still nailed it. Did you feel like you were nailing it? Was there ever a time where you felt like maybe you shouldn't be here? I mean, I know I feel like that all the time. When I'm running a business, I feel like, I guess, it's the imposter syndrome, right?

Judith [00:12:08] Yes, it's that good old imposter syndrome that I think really impacts on women. And I've grown to hate that saying "fake it till you make it" because I think that just reinforces it. Absolutely in the early days and you know, even to some degree probably now I've felt like I had the imposter syndrome. And when you look around a table and you can't see anybody else like you and you can't see yourself reflected back in the men that are around the table, and because I was usually the only woman in the room, it is really, really easy to feel like you don't belong. And the men I was working with had a saying, oh, if your face doesn't fit, you're not going to make it. And I'd sit there going but my face doesn't fit because there's nobody else. And they were full of helpful advice for me, such as, you know, you're too feminine; you're not feminine enough. You're trying to be one of the boys. You're too assertive; you're not assertive enough. They were full of great advice and trying to change me. And it made me really unsure of who I was and who I needed to be and that contributed to the imposter syndrome, I think, for me. So I had to back off and look inside and reflect so when I left one of those meetings with the men and I felt like I had spoken up too much or not enough or I spoke

against the room and why was I speaking against the room? Why was I the only dissenting voice? I had to look back and assess why I had made those decisions or changes or ask those questions and how they fit with me and my values and what we were trying to achieve. And I checked in with myself a lot to reassure myself that actually I did belong in that room and I had something worthwhile to contribute but it can be hard.

Rebekah [00:14:03] Do you still ever feel like that? And what questions do you ask yourself?

Judith [00:14:06] Sometimes when you are in the room and you challenge your team or you challenge one of your directors, why they've made a decision or they haven't made a decision and you can see a bit of pushback, you have to think, why am I challenging them and is it the right thing to do? And what's going to happen if I don't challenge them? Is the decision safe? Is it right? Have we got enough information? Am I just pushing too hard. So, yes, you do constantly have to self-reflect and check in and make sure you're doing the right thing. And often there's no one else at that point in time you can rely on or check in with other than yourself.

Rebekah [00:14:48] Sounds like it's a real balance.

Judith [00:14:50] It is a hard balance to strike. And you've just got to ask, what are your other options? Someone once said to me, you walk into a meeting and you can make decisions really, really quickly. And I don't know how you do it. But actually, I walk into a meeting, I hear what everyone has to say, and I know in my head what we need the outcome to be. And all my training as a paramedic has given me that ability to triage that information really quickly and make those what seem like quick decisions but are really considered decisions. So you have to be able to walk in, you have to give everyone a chance to speak and to hear them. But you have to know what the safe outcome or what the outcome is that you're looking for because in my business, we are dealing with people's lives.

Rebekah [00:15:35] How do you make that quick decision and know that you've thought through it?

Judith [00:15:38] You're trained to sieve and sort and triage information, you know, I sit there and I listen because everybody's got something to add. And sometimes when you're making those decisions, you can slow them down because you've got the time to walk away or you've got the time to go away and get more information and so you can slow down. But you also have to know when that decision is actually time critical and really important, and you have to walk away from the meeting with the next action, and it just comes from years and years of having to do it and experience. And I can't put my finger on what it is, but I think it is the sum of everything I've done throughout my career that allows it to happen.

Rebekah [00:16:21] If we make mistakes in business, you know, we might lose a few dollars, whereas in emergency services, if you make mistakes, like you said, it costs people's lives and you've got a whole community depending on you. What is different about an emergency services culture from, say, a business culture?

Judith [00:16:38] We're really good in crisis. So we are really, really well trained in walking in, being the confident one in the room, taking charge, assessing that information and making a decision. And, you know when there is an emergency such as a bushfire or a cyclone or whatever it is that everyone around you will step up and they've got your back and you don't ever have to worry about someone having another priority or be busy on something else or a project because at that moment, everyone comes together, they all know their roles and they all know what they're working towards because that's what we're trained to do. So it's always fantastic to know that someone has your back. We don't always operate in crisis, though. So what we have to have trained out of us is that, that automatic let's just do things on the fly and react. And so when we don't have a crisis, there's a lot of planning and a lot of risk assessment and business continuity. And that's sort of where we have to move away from our training, where we step out of the field and develop those skills.

Rebekah [00:17:47] I'm curious also about values. What are some of the values that underpin your organisation?

Judith [00:17:53] Our values are empathy, and I know I can see the values sitting across on my wall and it talks about respect and equality. And, you know, we all have those values. But when you look at our people,

they have the ability to walk into somebody's home that is completely different to them. But it's about walking in and seeing the human in the person and treating them with a great deal of dignity and respect. And so they're really strong values and attributes that run through our people.

Rebekah [00:18:26] And does that impact how they show up at work with their colleagues?

Judith [00:18:29] Oh, absolutely, you know, we have an eclectic mix of people, but they're a fantastic team and they come to depend on each other. And because they're often a team of two in an ambulance, they know that that person at that point of time is all they've got and so they quickly and tightly form a great team bond.

Rebekah [00:18:49] Something I've heard you talk about is in teams and emergency services, anyone could be called to step up as a leader at any point. How does that impact how people collaborate?

Judith [00:18:59] On the day of a tragic accident, the first ambulance crew that rocks up, they could be the most junior crew on the road that day but at that instance, they're the leaders and they're in charge. And so your power and control and your rank structure means that the next crews have to listen to them so that when you come back to the workplace and, you know, everything sort of evens out, what do you do with those valuable skills? And I think it is about looking for opportunities for those people, whether it be through getting them to lead a practical change, run a project or something simple but just because they don't have a position title doesn't mean that they're not valuable and all their experience and their leadership, you need to access it and use it and harness it and it's very important. And you can't just rely on people, who have a title after their name, everyone's got value.

Rebekah [00:19:58] Have you seen that experience where someone is junior and they've turned up to an accident and they have been all of a sudden the leader at a scene? Have you seen that change people?

Judith [00:20:09] I've seen it grow people, absolutely, through my three years of paramedic training, I didn't do anything big. And then my first couple of weeks as a paramedic, all of a sudden all I got thrown at me was trauma. And that had been a real nervous thing for me. You know I've never done it as a junior with someone senior above me. What happens now when I am the senior person? You put a bravado on and you puff yourself up because you have to get yourself through it and you have to get people to listen to you. And so doing that, when you walk away and when you go back to stations, it does build your confidence and you reflect on it and you realise you can do it and you do have the skills and you do start to see the value in yourself. And so absolutely, I see that experience when people realise the challenges they can step up to when they come back into the workplace. It means that the other things that were around them before that they didn't think they could do, they're prepared to give it a go.

Rebekah [00:21:12] As a businessperson, I see that is just such a valuable insight. You're in a crisis situation, but maybe creating something where everybody is called to lead. I think that could have a huge impact on engagement and their perception of themselves and their capabilities.

Judith [00:21:27] And you have to make sure they're heard, you know, that when we're sitting in a meeting or when we're sitting in a work group or a project group, you have to make sure they understand that their voice and their opinion of what they're saying. You have to give them the chance to have the space to be heard because the person with the highest rank in the room isn't the smartest person in the room and doesn't have all the insight and it's that team around you that will make something better.

Rebekah [00:21:53] Someone gave you a piece of advice once, the way to shine is to let others shine. What does that mean to you and how do you use that every day in a practical sense?

Judith [00:22:03] I see some leaders that think leading a team from the front means taking the credit for everything when actually people sit back and they know what that leader contributed to the team and they also know what the team did. So for me, it is about making sure credit is where credit's due. So if something was an idea of someone in my team, whatever level it was, they need to know that they did a brilliant job and they need to know that everyone else around them saw that brilliant job and they need to have the credit for that. And I think if you make sure you attribute success to the people in the team, rather than trying to take it

yourself, you build a stronger team and you build that loyalty. Whereas if you're just out in front letting the light shine on you, everyone behind you is going to fall away and it's going to be very lonely and you'll find that your success will slip away because your success was built on other people, not just solely on your efforts. You have to give everyone else an opportunity to one, step up and shine, to take credit for their ideas and also grow and lead your team onto some amazing opportunities.

Rebekah [00:23:17] Earlier, we talked about being self-reflective and constantly checking in with yourself, I'm curious now that you are CEO and you must have had a huge 12 months with Covid, do you still check in with yourself? Do you still ask, are you the right person in this role, like you did when you were in the earlier roles?

Judith [00:23:35] Oh, absolutely and I think at the start of Covid because I lead both an emergency service and I have a commercial side to my business, there was some really big questions I had to ask myself because no one knew where we were going, what it was going to mean and I needed to really ask myself whether I was going to be strong enough to step up and lead this organisation because there were tough decisions being made about standing people down and stopping areas of the business from operating that have a lasting impact on people. And also what we were asking of our ambulance service and what we were asking them to step up and do. So I was constantly reflecting what I was going to have to do and was I strong enough to do it and was I making the right choices. And I needed not only to reflect and check in with myself, but I needed to look around me for those people who were in similar positions or who I'd relied on in the past or I could turn to for sounding boards because you can't always live in your head and you need someone else to either balance out what you're thinking and let you know you are on the right track or to bring you down a bit and talk through things because you can't do it all on your own.

Rebekah [00:24:57] What made you think, yes, I am the right person at this particular point in time?

Judith [00:25:01] I think because I constantly was checking in to make sure are we doing the right thing? Is there any options? Are there any pathways rather than just trying to forge ahead and arrogantly assume I knew everything and I don't think anyone could put their hands up or people shouldn't during Covid and assume they knew everything. So it's the fact that I knew I didn't know everything that I needed to look elsewhere for answers reassured me that I was never going to make a snap decision that was going to adversely impact on my team or what we were trying to do.

Rebekah [00:25:36] Thank you, Judith, and final question, at Leading Women, we are committed to activating women's leadership, is there a leadership tool that you could give us for our Toolbox?

Judith [00:25:47] I think following on from what I just said, in that you can't do this alone and you have to know your people, know your tribe and know who you can turn to because it's a very lonely job at the top. And it won't last long if you think you're doing it all by yourself. So I have a fantastic group of friends around me, who are in similar jobs or in very different jobs that at any given point in time, I can pick up the phone to them and they'll be there for me. And conversely, they can do the same with me. And then beyond that, I have a really strong network of other CEOs that, again, I can pick up the phone to and know that they will give me the right advice and guidance or mentors. I've had the same mentor for almost 20 years now, and he's an amazing person and very well balanced and I just admire everything about him. But you can't do it alone and you've got to make sure that as you go, you build and collect people that can be there for you and can help and knowing that you have to give back to them as well. It's a two way street.

Rebekah [00:27:00] Thank you. I'm going to go away and use a lot of your advice. Thank you so much, Judith. It was lovely to chat.

Judith [00:27:06] Thank you for having me, Rebekah, it was great to chat to you too.

Julienne [00:27:09] 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](https://twitter.com/leadingwomensaus)

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