



Leading Women podcast
Commonwealth Bank Women in Focus

Episode 3: Tanya Van Der Water, CEO of Buckaroo Leatherworks on the responsibility of delivering quality Australian-made products.

Hosted by: Rebekah Campbell
Interviewee: Tanya Van Der Water

Featuring: Julienne Price, Executive Manager Women in Focus

Tanya openly shares the challenges, risks and rewards in taking over an iconic family business. In this episode she also talks about the advantages of failing fast, the power of a brand story and the responsibility of delivering quality Australian-made products.

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 [00:00:32] Welcome to Leading Women the place to ignite your leadership and redefine the business landscape. I'm your host, Rebekah Campbell. And today's episode offers a different perspective on business with Tanya Van Der Water, CEO of Buckaroo Leatherworks. Tanya openly shares the challenges, risks and rewards in taking over an iconic family business. We talk about the advantages of failing fast, the power of a brand story and the responsibility of delivering quality Australian-made products. Tanya, welcome to Leading Women, so thanks for joining us today. Where are you dialing in from?

Tanya [00:01:19] Hey, Rebekah, I am on Dharawal Country. I'm in a suburb called Bellambi, which is where our headquarters are, and it's south of Sydney on the beautiful beach. It's a really nice spot.

Rebekah [00:01:32] Well, thank you very much for joining us today. I want to start by asking you about your leadership journey.

Tanya [00:01:38] There's no sort of Cinderella story to my leadership journey, but I had a lot of experience in working with my dad for almost a decade before he died. We were a very small business. So small business mentality, small business approaches to the way that we made decisions, the way we communicated, the way that we even engage with staff. You know, a lot of the staff were friends or family. And so I guess with my dad's passing, it just gave me an opportunity to kind of develop a growth path for myself personally.

Rebekah [00:02:13] Tell us a bit about the journey of the business so the business was started by your dad?

Tanya [00:02:18] Yes, so my dad was actually a costs and works accountant at Samsonite in South Africa. And leatherwork really was just a hobby for him. And he set up a very, very small shop there doing small leather goods and it was called the Leather Nook. That started in 1971 and very, very slowly became a business. In 1979 my parents came to Australia and here my dad was able to say that leatherwork was his trade and he just was a one-man operation for a really long time.

Rebekah [00:02:53] At what stage did you come into the business and what was it that attracted you to the business?

Tanya [00:02:57] So my relationship with my dad at the time when I joined the business, you know, it was a little bit disconnected. My parents had divorced a few years earlier. I was very close with my dad but having said that, I guess it was a bit of a superficial relationship. I sort of saw my entrance into the business as an opportunity for us to reconnect. So I joined the business at a time when, yeah, I was so young and so naive, but still really kind of bullish and felt that I knew a lot more than what I actually did.

Rebekah [00:03:32] I can't imagine what it would be like to work with my dad. What was it like?

Tanya [00:03:37] It was never easy, but we were at loggerheads every day. So the foundational thing was I was always trying to prove to my dad that I knew more than him because I was taking a modern approach. He was trying to always prove that he knew more than me because he was just an older, experienced human being. And so we were constantly competing when it came to ideas. But that natural competitiveness really sparked off innovation, new ways of looking at things, substance-filled conversation about how we could sort of do things. So I guess in a nutshell that just kind of caused this bit of a, you know, explosive environment at times. And then with his passing, I really miss that competitiveness. I really missed having someone, who I felt I needed to prove myself to.

Rebekah [00:04:32] So you worked in the business with him for a while. Can you tell us a little about that journey?

Tanya [00:04:36] My dad sort of challenged me and he, like, had designed this belt and it's our signature belt, it's truly what we're known for today. I was 18 and he kind of like, threw it at me. And said, do you want to see if you can sell this. It was this crazy concept, this crazy notion, because it was absolutely challenging what anyone had ever thought of a traditional tool belt.

Tanya [00:05:02] My dad used to say, you know, you don't know everything and you've got to stop walking around like you think you know everything. And at the time, it used to really cut me and bother me. But then sort of later on, as I went down sort of this leadership journey by myself and I didn't have him anymore, I did start to reflect on that. And I really do feel that I don't have all the answers. I don't know everything. I can always find people that know a hell of a lot more than me and bringing in other people's experience is really quite a rich part of my leadership.

Rebekah [00:05:39] So you were all of a sudden going from working under your dad to you, running the show, what was that like?

Tanya [00:05:46] I completely destroyed the business in the first year of taking over.

Rebekah [00:05:51] And how did you do that?

Tanya [00:05:52] I just didn't understand financial documents. I was so preoccupied when he was around in sales and marketing and storytelling and the really kind of brand building stuff of which I didn't need to know how to run a business for a lot of what I was actually able to bring to it. I didn't need to know any of the details of fiscal management. And so that first year, I just really had no idea what I was doing. And I really needed to say that out loud in order for things to change, I really needed to acknowledge that and it did come at a point where I literally was working really late at night and I found myself actually saying out loud, like, I actually don't know what I'm doing.

Rebekah [00:06:41] And so what did you do at that point? Did you get help?

Tanya [00:06:43] Yes, so I decided to really make a conscious effort to learn through surrounding myself with people that always knew more than me. And it was a really significant part of, I think, my personal development as well, because I had to sit with the stuff that made me insecure. I had to really sit with the fact that I probably wasn't the best person at that time to be in the business doing what I was doing. I really didn't have the experience or the professional wisdom to be in a position where I was running a business and it was quite daunting. But I did then start to put feelers out to find people that I felt I really needed to learn from. I needed to keep people who knew a lot more than me very, very close.

Rebekah [00:07:29] Was there anyone in particular or anything that you found that really helped?

Tanya [00:07:34] At that point in time I had three children under the age of three, I was really stressed and I felt so burdened by feeling like I needed to take care of everybody around me and didn't make any efforts to take care of myself. And I looked for someone, who could take a lot of that stress and burden away from me that was the priority at that point in time. I don't think it was the best thing for the business now in hindsight but at that time that's what I needed and it just all became a catalyst and spurred off a new path for myself and the business.

Rebekah [00:08:15] You're now running the business, your dad didn't have massive ambitions for growth, but you did. And now the business has 50 plus employees so you've obviously done something that's taken it to that next level. You must have taken some risks.

Tanya [00:08:31] So with me, I felt like I really needed to take a kind of go hard or go home approach because I wanted to treat this as a legacy business. I wanted for this to be that I was putting my mark on it as a second generation business owner. One of the first risks that I took was actually identifying that a lot of product that we were making while my dad was alive, we just didn't have the scope or the capability to continue to make those products. So I immediately made a decision to only make tool belts and actually become a specialist tool belt maker, that was a huge risk in itself because it actually sort of cut out about 50, 60% of our product offering at the time. But I was recognising where our strengths lay and where they didn't. And for our future path, our strengths lay in developing this brand new concept and taking a whole new approach to tool belts. We were challenging the norm. We were challenging the traditional expectation of what a tool belt should do.

Rebekah [00:09:34] So you cut the products where you had competition and focus solely on that product where you were unique.

Tanya [00:09:40] Yes, so I guess leading up to cutting out a lot of those products we weren't making anymore, you know, they were highly competitive markets. So handbag, shoes, belts that most of the leather workers and the leather goods producers were making. So we decided to go down a completely different path, which gave us the scope and the opportunity to start, to actually just compete against ourselves, better ourselves, put ourselves in a position where we had very few global competitors even, let alone Australia. Even to this day, we have no competition here in Australia. So it really gave us the opportunity to invest in the collaborative elements of continuous improvement and just standardising, benchmarking ourselves against ourselves.

Rebekah [00:10:25] You chose to take risks. Can you tell me about the biggest risk that you took at that time?

Tanya [00:10:29] Some of the risks that I took, a lot of people probably would never take with an Australian manufacturing business. There's nothing cheap about making product in Australia. There's nothing easy about creating goods in a country that has the highest wages costs, direct costs. So what I did was I could see that on the horizon, the potential in moving outside of Australia for us. So the potential lay in seeking out other markets, we have a very high quality product, which means that our repeat purchase rate is very, very low. In order for us to be able to find new customers we actually have to look at new segments, new markets altogether and not necessarily go back to the same customers each and every time. So a really big risk that I took was I said to my husband, I think we should go to Canada. And I think that we should work hand-in-hand with a distributor over there to basically launch Buckaroo to the North American market and we should do it ourselves. And so with that, we actually moved with our four children in 2017, we moved to Canada. So we literally just put everything on hold and we went there with no plan, no direction, just this driving, burning kind of ambition to want to succeed. So the risks associated with that, there were so many along the way, a big one being that when we did finally land in Canada, the distributor that I'd chosen, I decided quite quickly I didn't want to work with them anymore. So we had a legal battle on our hands in our first three months of being there.

Rebekah [00:12:17] What did you do next? But how do you even get a new distributor, or start marketing your product? Can you just tell us a little about those early days in North America and what it was like?

Tanya [00:12:26] Yes, I mean, it was a nightmare. It took me two months to decide that I didn't want to work with the distributor anymore. It took me coming home almost every day with my husband saying, is everything okay? And me saying, yes and it wasn't. It absolutely wasn't okay. I wasn't happy with how they were wanting to just bastardise our product in terms of price point, flog it here, there and everywhere, really kind of miss out a lot of the family legacy element of the brand storytelling. I wasn't happy with any of it. So when I finally made the decision, yeah, I mean, we faced a bit of a legal battle. We had to buy back stock. We had a teeny tiny house and we just had, you know, almost, I don't know, floor-to-ceiling of boxes with our kids wondering what was going on but what we - and when I say 'we' it was my husband and I - we decided to really engage in this grassroots campaigning. So we felt that we knew the product best. We knew our story best, we knew our audience best and we literally would just drive around from site-to-site and we would find tradies that we felt were going to be the best representatives of our product. And we would give away stuff very similar to how we started off here in Australia. Having said that, though, we did it a bit better in North America and it ended up being that our products were on TV, magazines, you know, lots of influencers really kind of took to it. And we developed and forged relationships, which we still have today. It was pretty, yeah pretty daunting, but it all worked out in the end.

Rebekah [00:14:01] So one of those great stories that you look back on, at the time, it would be scary but, you know, you look back on as like a defining moment.

Tanya [00:14:08] At the time, it was disastrous, yes.

Rebekah [00:14:11] I know that feeling, you know, when something isn't right and you have to make a change, it can put you into a scary situation but that is where the growth happens.

Tanya [00:14:20] Yes and I guess the payoff with that was just the handholding element, which made sure that the brand was being positioned the right way from the start with the right storytelling behind it and that was really the thing that has now given us a lot of future potential growth in a really quite massive market.

Rebekah [00:14:42] You had this unique product, there were a lot of businesses in the 90s trading with China. You could have manufactured them much cheaper in China. Why didn't you go and manufacture in China?

Tanya [00:14:52] So obviously, from a quality control perspective, you know, when you make your goods in a controlled environment like we do, you're able to really pump out the absolute best in terms of the quality of those finished goods. We work with a lot of local producers of our raw materials as well so there's a really close connect there, close relationships, which we love to foster and build on. But there's a really strong advocacy element when you're making goods in Australia, you're representing a country that has a very rich history and we bring the indigenous narrative into our storytelling. We really pride ourselves on having the privilege of making products in Australia and providing all of our staff with the opportunity to learn knowledge of now, which is dead. You know, leatherwork is considered a dead trade; really foster the development of young people that join our business. So there's a lot of sort of privilege, responsibility that comes with it because it's definitely not easy or cheap to make product in Australia, but there is a lot of reward in us doing so.

Rebekah [00:15:59] You have a premium product. Do you see a swing back to high quality products with strong narratives as a trend?

Tanya [00:16:08] Definitely, in the last three years or so in particular, there's been such a quite heavy focus, commercially speaking, on sustainability and people wanting to make sure that where their dollars are spent is going to products, brands, companies that are ethical, that are doing the right thing, that have high standards for themselves, that are safe, that are producing products with high labour standards for example. We tick absolutely all those boxes and more and what we've really found is that premium products have now become an investment part of what it is for a tradie, let's say, they're really prepared to invest in products that will go the distance. So we've seen a massive shift, as have other Australian producers over the last few years in particular, and definitely exceptionally so throughout this Covid period, where people are just not interested in the cheap stuff anymore.

Rebekah [00:17:08] So tell me about that Australian story, you have got one signature product and you decided to keep manufacturing in Australia even though you were looking to sell the product in new markets. Why do you think that was important? And then I want to dig into how you actually did that and how you really capitalised on that Australian brand?

Tanya [00:17:28] We have a product that really resonates with our audience. There is a very, very high sense of loyalty. There's a lot of intangible things that give our brand, give the Buckaroo brand a lot of strength. And one of them is our, it's our underdog story and that underdog story - it's really synonymous with successful Australian businesses. And where you see iconic Australian brands, you know R.M. Williams, Akubra and the like, they've all got this underdog story. It's really important when it comes to representing Australia, when it comes to showcasing your quality of work. So for me, it's a no brainer that we can continue to manufacture here because this business was always set up to take care of, you know, its staff, take care of the people making the product, take care of the craft, take care of what it means to bring high quality goods to a market, which is flooded with the absolute opposite.

Rebekah [00:18:29] On the Australian story, the underdog story, just on a practical level, is it in your packaging? Is it something that you share with your distributors, your PR, how do you leverage that story?

Tanya [00:18:40] Yes, so it's really important, it's a really sellable part of the entire product offering and the brand story, especially to markets like North America. There's a natural trust of Australian-made products globally that's a fact. It's actually been researched that that's the case. So these are all things that we kind of carry in our backpack. The fact that we're taking a product that has a really rich Australian roots story to audiences all around the world, the surf, the sand, the bush, it's a very sellable thing globally. And we are really entrenched in that with our brand. It's really natural for us. We don't make anything up. We don't have to. It's just a really nice part of what we bring to a market, which is just absolutely dominated by brands that just don't have a story anywhere near what we're able to offer.

Rebekah [00:19:38] So I know you said before you brought in other people to support you and the things that you weren't good at, but now you're running a team of 50 people. I know that's something that's important to you is that everyone feels in the organisation that they can take risks and that no idea is a silly idea and that you want to hear everybody's ideas. How do you actually do that?

Tanya [00:19:57] Yes, well, we kind of adopt a fail fast mentality. So as an Australian manufacturer in an industry, which we don't have benchmarked standards, we're just really only bettering ourselves against ourselves. We like to take innovative thought as far as it possibly can be taken in all areas of the business, big or small. So where we're able to introduce new ideas, new concepts, trial new ways of making product, thinking about product, selling product, communicating with our audiences, we really just dive in and we just try it. And it's not an expensive exercise for us to just take out a little bit of time to bring a new idea to the production floor, let's say. It's not expensive, anybody can do it, it can happen straight away. And if it doesn't work, we learn very quickly that it doesn't work. So it's a really cheap, efficient way to discover if something has the potential to be a great new path or if it's not, then it just ends there and it's fine. But learning from those mistakes, if there's any, is a big part of how we actually better ourselves as a business.

Rebekah [00:21:08] And finally, just around your team, so you've got a team now of 50, I mean, to get your team to actually take risks, there's a lot of box ticking that goes on. And I found it very difficult running businesses to get my team to really care, how is it that you get team buy-in so that everyone is, you know, waking up in the morning with those ideas and bringing them to the organisation?

Tanya [00:21:30] I think it has to just really be embedded of the culture of the business. You know, you have to bring in people, who want to be a part of this sort of learning environment. This is a very unique business in that all the training is done on the ground. No one comes with qualifications from elsewhere that they then can apply here. I'm talking about the production side of the business more so, you know, people come here because they want to learn something that's just not available to them in any other business in the country. So if they want to be a part of the culture of which is absolutely one that I feel I need to lead by example, I feel I need to show that risks are possible, risk can be taken and mistakes are just a normal part of learning. You know, all the things that I do, quite naturally, I feel that it's important for me to showcase that as being

part of our underlying business culture and just basically what it means to be involved in the Buckaroo approach, you know, the Buckaroo way of doing things. So it's very much now just entrenched in our day-to-day. It's seen, you know, you can't be what you can't see. It's very much a seen thing.

Rebekah [00:22:39] So you're looking for people that are showing those attributes that they want to be a part of that culture as they come in and then they're seeing you and seeing how everybody else is approaching risk and creating ideas.

Tanya [00:22:49] Yes, that's right, it forms a big part of creative confidence as well.

Rebekah [00:22:52] So, Tanya, at Leading Women, we're committed to activating leadership, is there something you can share with our audience that's a tool to add to our Leadership Toolbox?

Tanya [00:23:02] I don't share it very often, but there's an African proverb that I came across at a time when I really needed it. And it is to get lost is to learn the way. For me that is my real take on leadership. It's through the struggle, it's through the things I don't know that I'm able to actually get the most growth and development from. So I don't mind failing. I don't mind making mistakes anymore. I don't mind getting lost because I know that it gives me then an opportunity to forge a new path that I probably never would have had the opportunity to if I hadn't flunked or failed. The courage that it takes sometimes to get yourself out of those positions is definitely something that I wouldn't trade with my experiences for the world.

Rebekah [00:23:53] Thank you so much for sharing that story and for all your stories today, really inspiring and I learnt a lot by listening to you, so thank you so much.

Tanya [00:24:01] Thank you for letting me share. I really appreciate having the opportunity to chat and go over a lot of my experiences, which have really shaped, who I am today as a leader, so it's been excellent.

Julienne [00:24:17] 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)

Things you should know: Guests featured in the podcast are speaking from their personal experiences only. As this podcast has been prepared without considering your objectives, financial situation or needs, you should, before acting on the content consider its appropriateness to your circumstances. CommBank does not necessarily endorse the views of a particular individual or guarantee the accuracy of the information provided.