



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

**Episode 8: Samantha Read, CEO of Chemistry Australia on manufacturing, diversity and mentorship.**

**Hosted by: Rebekah Campbell**  
**Interviewee: Samantha Read**

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

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Samantha Read, CEO of Chemistry Australia talks about manufacturing, diversity and mentorship. She also shares the power of backing yourself, leading with strategic thinking and creating formidable partnerships to ensure a more sustainable future.

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**Julienne** [00:00:02] Welcome to Leading Women, your place to share and celebrate real stories and access the tools and resources to help activate your leadership. Hi, I'm Julienne Price, Executive Manager of 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 today's episode were talking with Samantha Read, CEO of Chemistry Australia about all things manufacturing, diversity and mentorship. Harnessing her engineering mindset, Samantha shares the power of backing yourself, leading with strategic thinking and creating formidable partnerships to ensure a more sustainable future. Samantha Read, welcome to Leading Women, where are you joining us from today?

**Samantha** [00:01:12] I'm joining you from Dja Dja Wurrung Country, which is north of Melbourne in the Macedon Ranges area.

**Rebekah** [00:01:22] Now you have had an incredibly interesting career. You started as a research engineer for BHP and then have made your way through some really impressive executive and non-executive roles. Can you describe for us, in your own words, your leadership journey?

**Samantha** [00:01:36] Well, I think my leadership journey has been developing all through my career. There hasn't been one Big Bang moment. I started out, as you said, as a research engineer with BHP and started working in teams and really learning about what it means to have respect for your team members and be accountable for delivery. And I think that's a key leadership attribute. I was fortunate to be nominated for the Committee for Melbourne for their Future Focus Group, and that was an extraordinary two-year leadership experience with other emerging leaders. And we did some really great projects and it was a lot of fun. But my first people leadership role was as a superintendent in a steel mill. I had four crews of eight operators, shift supervisors and maintenance, and that really was quite a challenging environment for a woman.

**Rebekah** [00:02:27] Yes, I'm sure.

**Samantha** [00:02:27] I think most of the people I was working with were men and it really did start to challenge me and build resilience. But it certainly taught me about, you know, working with teams of people and developing their skills and capabilities. After that, I moved to Holden, and that was after more than 10 years of BHP and I just really loved cars and it was just a great opportunity to go and join Holden, big fan of Holden since I was young. So I was initially employed in the quality department and became a manager there, and I had a team of people, so I started to learn about performance management, providing direction. From there, I jumped into corporate affairs which is a big leap in my career and headed up government relations. I then shifted again and worked in procurement in GM's purchasing department and was involved there leading a larger team of professionals. I then went back into corporate affairs and took on more senior roles and

ended up being executive director for corporate affairs. And at that time I was also appointed to the Holden board, as well as the GM Australia board and also the Federal Chamber of Automotive Industries board. So that was my first introduction to being on a board. And then I had a short career break, which was a great opportunity to just step back and think about what I really wanted to do in the next stage of my career and to reflect on my strengths and the things I really loved to do and what I was passionate about. And what I was passionate about was Australian industry manufacturing. So I took on CEO roles in industry associations, and that's what I'm still doing today and I love it.

**Rebekah** [00:04:22] Samantha, you're a self-confessed engineering nerd. You talked about being at Holden and making the big shift into corporate affairs. Why did you choose to do that?

**Samantha** [00:04:31] I think I have always had an interest in public policy and politics and, you know, those bigger picture issues for the country. So, at the time gender diversity was important to Holden becoming an employer of choice for women. And that led me to Alison Terry, who, it was at a meeting of the Holden Women's Council, and she was then head of government relations. And I had a chat to her about my interests, and she approached me later to come and join the corporate affairs team and take on the role of government relations and public policy. And I took that, I mean, it was a complete leap of faith, but it was just a gut feel that that was the right thing to do. Throughout my career I've always looked at the different skills I was developing, and I always see these, what seem to be slightly sideways shifts as opportunities to build skills, you know, new transferable skills. But it was also in an area that I was really interested in and I loved it that was one of the best decisions I made.

**Rebekah** [00:05:39] Samantha, people come to these board and corporate affairs roles with different experiences and strengths. What do you think you brought to those roles at the time?

**Samantha** [00:05:48] Look, I'm now a non-executive director, CEO and engineer with a career spanning 30 years across a range of industry sectors. So chemicals, plastics, renewable fuels, automotive steel, as well as community health. And undertaking those different roles, often with steep learning curves and doing it again and again has really built that level of resilience and confidence that I don't think I would have achieved if I kept it safe and I hadn't made those changes throughout my career. So I do have a diverse set of transferable skills that I've built up over time. So I may not have had all of those skills at the time but as I've changed roles, I've built up those skills.

**Rebekah** [00:06:34] For someone who's starting out and who's maybe they're sitting in a role, that's an engineering or a science type role and they're thinking, maybe I could make a bigger contribution on a board, what kind of strengths did you have back at the beginning that you brought and then you recognised those skills and that gave you confidence?

**Samantha** [00:06:51] I think I had a really well developed understanding of the industry, manufacturing environments, really practical operational skills. So working in a corporate affairs department for a manufacturing business, I brought a lot of those real world skills into corporate affairs. And then my boss at the time, you know, she taught me about government relations, she taught me about public policy. It would have been a lot harder to have not had that background and done it the other way. So it really did, you know, rely on the fact that I had a lot of industry knowledge when I came into the role and then we were advocating and developing policy for the industry. So having that practical understanding of what the issues were, what the challenges were, really was important for those roles.

**Rebekah** [00:07:45] At BHP, you were given a business directory. Can you tell us what that was?

**Samantha** [00:07:50] Look, it was a directory of the company and in the directory, the heads of the different divisions and departments would have a bio. And it was really interesting because what I learnt from that was that the senior leaders at the business had worked in many parts of the business. So, I took from that that it was really important to get a diverse set of skills, if you were going to ultimately aspire to be a head of a major business or a major company that it would help you in your career if you had a good understanding of a range of different functions.

**Rebekah** [00:08:26] Thinking back to that business directory that you read all those years ago and knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to other women about how to approach a career path?

**Samantha** [00:08:36] Looking back on my career, I've had a squiggly career path and you know, linear career paths are one way to get ahead and in some organisations that is important. But in my career, every change that I've made has presented new challenges and learning opportunities. And I think from this, those experiences, I've developed a lot of transferable skills and this has helped build my resilience and also confidence in taking on the next challenge and the next challenge. So one important message I have for women is that you really do need to back yourself and lose that fear of failure. A comment that was made by the former Rio Tinto boss, Sam Walsh, a few years ago caught my attention. He said one of the biggest challenges is that you throw a job opportunity at a bloke and he says, I can do that. I've got all the background, I know exactly what I should do. But when you throw the same opportunity at a woman, they say, well, I've never done that before. It would be a huge stretch. And Mr Walsh wasn't urging women to lie in their job applications, but he did say, you need to recognise that gentlemen do stretch the facts a little bit and that women need to have more confidence in their ability to adapt, to be resilient and flexible and responsive to new challenges and to take a risk. If I hadn't been approached by Alison to take on the role of government relations and public policy, I wouldn't have applied for it. But after that experience and making that leap once, I had more confidence the next time to then move into purchasing, to then move into other roles in my career. So I think it's really important to understand that you do have a number of transferable skills that are important as you move from job to job, and that each change gives you that opportunity to build the next set of transferable skills, that then creates a great opening in terms of what you might be able to do in future.

**Rebekah** [00:10:38] One thing you're known for, Samantha, is your ability to form and leverage partnerships. So I'm just wondering if you could start by giving us an example of a partnership that you formed or been a part of that's had a major impact.

**Samantha** [00:10:52] Look, I really enjoy creating new opportunities and identifying ways in which people and organisations can come together to add value to each other. One of the examples, I think, as deputy chair of a community health organisation with the policy landscape shifting and pressures over sustainability in the sector, our board developed a strategy to seek partners to merge with, and we completed a successful merger late last year, bringing certainty in our ability to deliver client services and meet the needs in the region. But other partnerships have included less formal alignments with related industry associations, which Chemistry Australia now provides management services to and provides access to our broader capability.

**Rebekah** [00:11:39] I'm really interested in a partnership that you developed with CSIRO. Can you tell us how that partnership came about?

**Samantha** [00:11:46] We're a partner to CSIRO's mission to end plastic waste which is a really important initiative, and in the last six months, we've been working closely with them to support the development of a report on advanced recycling. And that's going to be really important technology to bring forward in Australia to help us deal with our plastic waste and turn it into a reusable resource for the economy.

**Rebekah** [00:12:11] Partnerships can be really hard. Can you tell us how you approach partnerships?

**Samantha** [00:12:16] I think it's really important to understand whether there's a cultural and values fit. It's really important. I think often the partnerships we've formed or I've been involved with, have emerged due to common needs and objectives or the opportunity to make or have a greater impact by working together. I think the first key, though, is that you have to build a good relationship. You have to get to know each other. You have to understand what the challenges and opportunities are and how you can work together. And in that process, you're building trust and that is absolutely critical in successful partnerships. I think it also needs to be win-win. You can't just have it as a one-sided affair. You know, it needs to be equal. And I certainly learnt that when I was working in procurement that you really need to build win-win partnerships. And I think it also needs to be complementary so that each party is bringing something to the table rather than it being one-sided.

**Rebekah** [00:13:20] When I was reading about you, I read a quote that you said, timing is critical. Why is that your mantra?

**Samantha** [00:13:27] Look, I think great ideas and opportunities can be lost if the timing isn't right. I had, I've had an idea to bring forward an industry leadership program for some time to support diversity and capability development in our industry's emerging leaders. But until recently, it just wouldn't have been the right time. And we may have lost the opportunity. I think you need to take a longer-term view. You need to have patience and you need to do all of the groundwork and ensure the conditions are right for success. So in the case of our new Chemistry Australia Emerging Leaders Advisory Council, it was important to first develop our new strategy for Chemistry Australia, to have built relationships and trust on our board before we could consider establishing the council.

**Rebekah** [00:14:24] Well that really nicely brings us to our next topic. I want to talk about manufacturing, but particularly women in manufacturing. We'll start with manufacturing in general. As an industry manufacturing is often seen as from the past, but you have said it's a place where the future can be solved right here on the ground. Tell us what you mean by that.

**Samantha** [00:14:43] I mean, here and globally, we are facing unprecedented challenges at the moment. You know, whether it's the pandemic, whether it's climate change or developing more sustainable circular economies, it's all really important. And in Australia, we've got national priorities in manufacturing around resources, technology, medical products, space, defence industries. I mean, these are all industries for our future. There are numerous innovations being made and investments being made in new technologies. In our sector alone, the chemistry industry is a critical enabler of innovation in the Australian economy. We supply 108 of 114 industry sectors, so we provide solutions to so many other industries, whether it be materials, products, technologies and the talent that enables sustainable solutions to be delivered. You know, we are putting our brightest minds to work for the development of transformational technologies and innovations that deal with climate change that cut emissions, improve energy efficiency throughout the value chain. There are so many Australian businesses out there now who are looking to the future and the role they will be playing in building the resilience in Australia's economy and solving those challenges. I think manufacturing is the future.

**Rebekah** [00:16:01] If manufacturing is the future, the next question is, are there enough women in manufacturing?

**Samantha** [00:16:06] The short answer is no.

**Rebekah** [00:16:09] Why not and what can we do about it?

**Samantha** [00:16:12] Look, I think there's a perception around manufacturing and what the environment is like to work in, and I think there's also the issue that we don't have enough women taking up STEM subjects at school. I think there are cultural biases and honestly, I think careers are influenced in the home. In my case, my dad, when I was growing up, spent a lot of time with me and, you know, we built a crystal radio set. I wasn't that interested in playing with dolls and those sorts of things. He encouraged me to take on maths and science subjects. And, you know, when I left school there was a lot of expectation to take on a university degree. And again, my family, my father introduced me to a Monash engineering professor. And he really fired my imagination around the great things that engineers can do. And this saw me apply for a place in engineering at Monash Uni. So I think, you know, it really does start in the home and it is a pity, but I hope that we will change that as people see that manufacturing has got such an important role to play in the future solutions to the challenges we face.

**Rebekah** [00:17:25] What a great dad and to recognise your interests and to encourage you.

**Samantha** [00:17:30] Yes, mum and dad always supported me. They never set any boundaries on the types of careers I could have and they were very supportive of my eventual decision to take on engineering.

**Rebekah** [00:17:40] I think as a parent there is a lot that we can learn from that. Mentorship, you've said that you met a very influential woman when you were working at Holden, who you struck up a relationship with and she has had an impact on your career and your choices. Can you tell us about that relationship?

**Samantha** [00:17:55] I'm really grateful to Alison Terry, who took a chance on a strategic quality manager and put me into the role as head of government relations, which was a pivotal turning point in my career. Alison is a passionate advocate for women in business. She's supported and mentored many women during their careers, and she was a great role model and someone I greatly admire for what she's achieved. Alison recognised that my experience working with the Australian supply base, working in industry was invaluable to the work that needed to be done in corporate affairs.

**Rebekah** [00:18:31] So she gave you your first shot. Did you continue that relationship as you've progressed through your career?

**Samantha** [00:18:38] Yes, I've kept in contact with Alison. She's now working in Western Australia and we sometimes connect. But I've another trusted mentor, Mike Salem, who I worked with at BHP and I really admired him and he became my mentor. He's still my mentor today, even though he's retired and living in Sydney. And, you know, he was really important in my career because he would always challenge me. He'd always say, you know, how's the job going? If I ever said, oh, you know, it's pretty good, you know, I'm pretty comfortable. He'd say, well, you know, you need to do something else, you need to challenge yourself. And it's the only way we learn. So Mike was, you know, has been a really important factor in my career. Yes, as I said, he's living in Sydney and he'd probably say, you know, I don't call him enough and we don't catch up enough.

**Rebekah** [00:19:31] It sounds like you've had some incredible mentors, kind of informal being, your first your dad, your university professor, Alison and Mike. I'm really interested in that relationship you've had with Mike. And for other women listening and are building that more formal mentorship arrangement, was there a point where you asked, will you be my mentor? How did that kind of more formal, this person is going to, is going to make a commitment to support me through my career? How did that come about?

**Samantha** [00:19:59] I've had formal mentors and I've also had informal mentors, and sometimes it's just about, you know, do you have a good relationship with someone and you get to a point where you feel, you know, I think that they've got a lot of value that they could add to me. And it's really important to build that trusting relationship between the two of you and then allowing frank and honest conversations to flow and allowing the other person to be quite direct and to challenge you.

**Rebekah** [00:20:26] To do that, do you establish how the rules work? I will be direct. I want you to be direct.

**Samantha** [00:20:31] Yes, in a formal mentor-mentoree relationship, yes, I think you have to have that conversation upfront about what it will and won't be and set the expectations at the start. I think that's really important for both parties. But I think in the more informal roles, it's just about catching up for a coffee, you know, saying, look, I'm looking at this job, you know, let's have a chat about it or, you know, I'm in a rut, you know, can we have a chat about what else I should be doing or what I should be thinking about.

**Rebekah** [00:21:02] You do so many things. I looked at your LinkedIn profile and it goes on and on for pages. I have to keep clicking, see more experiences and see more experiences. You must get asked to do different roles all the time. I'm interested in how you focus. How do you choose what roles to take on and what to zoom in and focus on?

**Samantha** [00:21:22] Look, I generally take on the activities that I'm interested in and care about and where I believe that I can make the time available. I tend to be, maybe it's because I'm an engineer, but I tend to be reasonably organised and plan ahead. I actively block out parts of the week for meetings, as well as preparation and planning time. I think you need to be quite deliberate in planning your time. But I also think you can always find time for things that are important to you, and work life balance is different for each person and at different stages of their life. And at my stage of life, I'm prepared to commit, you know, personal time to these activities during the week after hours and on weekends.

**Rebekah** [00:22:04] You mentioned time management, Samantha, and you seem like someone who is exceptionally good at time management, and I'm someone who is exceptionally bad at time management. So I'm very interested in what does your week look like? How do you block out time?

**Samantha** [00:22:19] I have to admit it's not always possible because sometimes external forces are at play and you can't do that. But when you do see your week and you look at your calendar and you've got blocks of time. I try to prioritise them so that you can actually focus on what you need to do, you know, allowing preparation and planning, allowing time for reading, allowing time to then talk to staff, allowing time for meetings. So I tend to try and block out parts of the week to allow me to do that. When I think about, you know, if I have to do a lot of writing or reading emails, you know, what part of the day is actually better for me to do that?

**Rebekah** [00:22:58] What is it for you?

**Samantha** [00:22:59] Morning, if I can, you can't always do it because you can't necessarily prioritise all your meetings for the afternoon, but I tend to like writing and concentrating in the morning.

**Rebekah** [00:23:08] Lastly, we have a Leadership Toolbox at Leading Women. Do you have a tool that you can share from your experience that our listeners could use in their toolbox?

**Samantha** [00:23:18] One of the key things that's really helped me in my leadership journey is strategic thinking and strategy development and implementation, and I think that is a really critical skill for all leaders to have. It's really important as well if you progress into board roles, and I've worked for a long time with an organisation called Resilient Futures, and they have a strategy approach, which is looking at dealing with disruption and it's called strategy in action. And it's about keeping strategy live in a business. And I found that a really useful tool set.

**Rebekah** [00:23:54] Can I just dig into it? What does strategic thinking mean to you and how do you use it?

**Samantha** [00:23:58] It means looking to the future and thinking about the conditions that are impacting us both at a local level, a domestic level and a global level, and looking at how that might create both risk and opportunity for the organisation that you're in and then how you then leverage those risks and opportunities to drive value added opportunity for the business and to ensure that you can be sustainable for the future. It also allows you to think about the types of capabilities and skills you might need to be developing to help you to leverage those opportunities.

**Rebekah** [00:24:35] Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us.

**Julienne** [00:24:38] 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 [womeninfocus.com.au](http://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 [#leadingwomenaus](https://twitter.com/leadingwomenaus)

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