



**Leading Women podcast**

**CommBank Women in Focus**

**Episode 1: Kate Wickett, Former CEO, Sydney WorldPride**

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**Interviewee: Kate Wickett**

**Featuring: Fiona McAuley, Head of Women in Focus, CommBank**

Kate Wickett, Former CEO, Sydney WorldPride on unlocking growth through volunteering, the gaps and gains in diversity and inclusion, and her success formula to not only back yourself but also the person standing next to you.

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**Fiona [00:00:06]** Welcome to Leading Women, your go-to podcast for stories, tools and resources to shape your leadership journey now and into the future. Hi, I'm Fiona McAuley, Head of Women in Focus at CommBank, joining you from Gadigal country. We acknowledge the traditional owners and recognise their continuing connection to country. We pay our respects to elders, past and present, and extend that respect to all First Nations people. Leading women is just one way CommBank Women in Focus supports the growth of women in business and community. So, no matter where you are on YOUR journey, we're here. Enjoy this episode as we hear from dynamic, inspiring, and resilient women together.

**Shivani: [00:00:54]** Welcome to Leading Women, I'm your host, Shivani Gopal and today's episode is an eventful and thought-provoking conversation with a service-driven leader who infuses team into every big, hairy and audacious challenge she delivers on. Kate Wickett, former CEO of Sydney World Pride, shares her unconventional leadership path from winning the bid to host Sydney World Pride in the final hour to delivering a pivotal world class event, Kate's visible, inclusive leadership has lifted all boats across the LGBTQIA+ community, tourism industries and the economy. Raised to always help others, she ignites the power of volunteer roles, shares the gaps and the gains in diversity and inclusion, and her success formula to not only back yourself, but to always back the person standing next to you. Kate, welcome to Leading Women. It's so good to have you.

**Kate [00:01:59]** Thank you so much. What a great initiative by the Commonwealth Bank.

**Shivani [00:02:03]** It is indeed, and we have the pleasure of being here together today on Gadigal country. Kate, yours is a diverse and impactful leadership journey. Can you share how your leadership was sparked and your path to here?

**Kate [00:02:17]** I was first inspired actually by my aunt. My aunt played netball for Australia in the 80s, and I remember vividly going along to those matches and seeing not just the comradery and the team connection between the women on the court, but the leadership from the captain and the vice captain. And I remember as a young girl standing on the sidelines thinking, wow, that's incredible. I want to be like that one day. And of course, I love my aunt very much. And my team have known me now to give many netball analogies, but that really was inspiring for me, whether it be on the sporting field or in a corporate boardroom. Leadership can come in many forms, in many ways and in many areas, and I was really inspired when I was a young girl.

**Shivani [00:03:00]** It's incredible. There are some great leadership lessons there, not just around teams, but I can also see through our prior conversations that, you know, loyalty as well is something that has played an incredible part of your leadership journey and your life. Kate, when we think of leadership roles, we tend to think of a corporate career or someone climbing the industry ladder. But volunteer leadership is at the heart of many communities driving systemic change. How essential is volunteer leadership and how do you prioritise it as an important career role?

**Kate** [00:03:32] Yes, I've been volunteering since I can remember, really. My parents were very pivotal in all of my brothers and sisters' experience in volunteering. We were raised that I should always help others where you can, and I don't think a really successful corporate career is mutually exclusive to giving time to others or volunteering, whatever the passion may be for volunteering. I also think it provides perspective and focus on your corporate career. Interestingly, I think depending on, what you're doing in your volunteer life, it really does help and certainly helped me with compassion and empathy and understanding others.

**Shivani** [00:04:16] Kate, I imagine that there are many of our listeners out there who would love to volunteer. And as you rightly point out, it's really about managing your time and managing your priorities. How might someone juggling their career make space for volunteer work in the way that you have?

**Kate** [00:04:35] Again, I think, yes, it's managing your time, but really it's about your priorities. Interestingly, when we were recruiting for Sydney WorldPride, we interviewed a number of people and asked during that interview process whether they had volunteered particularly, we are a not-for-profit, and a lot of people from the community applied for roles and those from corporates. And some really successful people said to us, oh, no, they didn't have time to volunteer. And I suppose for me that was an indication of A, did they want to help others, but B, what were their priorities? And not everyone does have time. People have kids. People have lives outside of work. But I made sure for me and it worked for me. It wouldn't necessarily work for everyone, but it worked for me to volunteer in my spare time or even make time to volunteer. Again, I enjoy spending time with others, and I think it's really important, particularly in a corporate space, to empathise and have compassion for people that don't necessarily have the same life as you do.

**Shivani** [00:05:41] You've got that great take on compassion and from an earlier conversation, you said this incredible thing around there's a nexus there around being in a leadership position and being altruistic and leaning into that. Can you share more about that?

**Kate** [00:05:55] Yes, I think certainly across my career I volunteered in different spaces, not just with the LGBTQI community. I've done everything from, you know, soup kitchens to administrative volunteering. I think, again, for me, it's around that diversity of experience and something that has been a common thread through my career. I mean, it looks like a wieldy road map, my CV, but something that has been constant has been that seeking diversity of experience from others in particular. And I think, when you have diversity of experience or, you know, cognitive diversity, it really does lend itself to experiencing and thinking about things in a different way.

**Shivani** [00:06:40] Speaking of thinking about things in a different way, how could we think outside the box around our own experiences and giving back?

**Kate** [00:06:47] Look, just because you're an accountant doesn't mean you need to volunteer in an accounting way. There are obviously many different health charities and not-for-profits, whether it be sporting, you know, the local sports club, volunteering, I suppose and certainly I've experienced this and seen in others, if you're going to volunteer, make sure it's something that you really are passionate about, because then it becomes a priority to you and not just something that you think you should do. And I think that's the real difference in the community of those who give to others. You hear passion as the word often described about their experience. But yes, I think it's important to commit to something that you're passionate about because obviously it then becomes very enjoyable as well.

**Shivani** [00:07:30] Kate, we often hear that growth comes from being uncomfortable. How can we apply that thinking to volunteering?

**Kate** [00:07:36] Yes, I've been thinking about that a lot recently. I have a number of friends who have never volunteered their time, and I suppose in lieu of volunteer time, they'll often make a donation. And I think, upon reflection, that really is possibly because people are fearful of their experiences. I do think putting yourself outside of your comfort zone is obviously, for me particularly, is where all the magic happens. I know that sounds like a cliché, but putting yourself outside of your comfort zone, experiencing other things that you wouldn't normally do so in your everyday life is really, for me, a great experience that, you know, it becomes pervasive in the way you look at problems or the way that you

look at other people. And I suppose I have given that a lot of thought. And perhaps people have some trepidation about volunteering or experiencing things outside of their comfort zone, but it's also incredibly rewarding.

**Shivani** [00:08:30] Kate, you've led one of the most significant events in Australian history with Sydney WorldPride, from orchestrating the winning bid to delivering a world-class event where everyone in the LGBTQIA+ community could see themselves. As your biggest leadership challenge and achievement, what did it take to bring Sydney WorldPride together as a leader?

**Kate** [00:08:53] Again, I think for me it was around diversity of experiences. Sydney WorldPride, we were really conscious that we couldn't be everything to everyone, but we wanted to give it one heck of a go. Certainly, the diversity of voices we talked a lot about elevating voices that hadn't been heard before or that had been silenced in the past. And so bringing a diverse team together was really important to me. My view has always been, if you want to have a diverse program or a diverse experience, then you need to make sure that everyone in the community is represented. So we had a program of several hundreds of events, and we wanted to ensure that those events reflected all of our community and all of our society. And so as a leader, I wanted to make sure that my team reflected who we were making and producing and putting on those events for.

**Shivani** [00:09:49] Kate, you had a mammoth task ahead of you and undertaking that you increase through your incredible goals. And it sounds like one of the strategies that you deployed to get there was a strategy of belief.

**Kate** [00:10:03] Yes, that's right, I often said to my team a catchphrase that, you know, we used a lot in the office was, you need to back yourself and you need to back others, but particularly back the person standing next to you. And as a leader, I've always believed in, you know, flat hierarchies that doesn't ever diminish or abrogate your responsibility and your accountability as a leader. But really bringing team together, and we spoke a lot over the four-year period about what it was to be a team and to have that, you know, courage of conviction to say, actually, we can do this. And standing to the person next to you, we can do this together. Over the period, we had a number of people say to us, so in the beginning, to be honest, we had people who doubted that we could a), bid or write a cogent or coherent bid, and then when we did win, which was a surprise to many, there were questions about whether we could actually deliver the event to the scale that we had ambitions for. And so that sense of courage, that sense of self-belief, but also belief in your team members was something that I was really conscious of cultivating at, WorldPride to say, yes, we can do this and we're going to do it together.

**Shivani** [00:11:19] And you really would have needed to have your team backing you and yourself, because you indeed did have some incredible ambitions. From what I hear, Kate, you were knocked back three times and you were often told, hey, Kate, you're being a little bit too ambitious here with your targets.

**Kate** [00:11:36] Yes, that's right, we wrote a, when I was the chair of Mardi Gras at the time, a voluntary position, we wrote a business case to Destination NSW, which didn't get over the line, unfortunately. And we were running out of time to bid. And so I said to Destination [NSW], look, I'm going to seek funding elsewhere in the government or sought to seek funding elsewhere. And we went straight to Gladys Berejiklian. And we're very, very lucky that, you know, we had the money within a week, it was only \$192,000 at the time. We fundraised the rest of it, and we ran the bid on about \$519,000, I think the final figure was. And so we were very fortunate that, you know, during the festival and then in the build up, all of the NSW Government were incredibly supportive. And I think, again, that's really about having courage of your convictions and saying, I think this is something that we really should do. And so we're very lucky to have such great support in the end.

**Shivani** [00:12:34] Kate, it sounds like your philosophy of having a flat hierarchy within your teams comes through in your execution strategies as well. You had Destination NSW say no to you, not once, not twice, but three times, so you went straight to Gladys Berejiklian.

**Kate** [00:12:49] Well, I thought if you can't get a result straight away, who else to go to? You go straight to the top. And so from there, we knew that if we had the backing of the government, we had the backing of the state. And if she said no, then, then that would be it. But time is of the essence. And, we're just so, so grateful that Gladys and her government ultimately were huge supporters. And the

Labor government now too were huge supporters. So, yes, I think, you know, aim high and, if you fail, then, you'll know, but I wouldn't give up.

**Shivani** [00:13:25] Kate, what advice do you have for women who want to follow in your foot steps? I hear you about having courage of your convictions, and you certainly had that. But there may be some women who are listening to this thinking, oh, I'm going to feel a bit nervous about it, a little bit trepidatious. Maybe I'm stepping on someone's toes. How might they go straight to the top?

**Kate** [00:13:45] Look, I think it's about being really honest with your message. Sure, I haven't always, I suppose, had the confidence I have today, but I've developed that confidence by taking plunges and taking risks. I actually quite enjoy taking risks now, but it certainly wasn't always the case. I suppose if you know what you're doing is for purpose and going to have a good result or the potential to have a good result, then it's worth asking, it's worth fighting for. And again, to my point earlier, the really magical outcomes, I think, really happen when you do put yourself in a vulnerable or a situation where you might feel vulnerable, but also a little scared.

**Shivani** [00:14:27] And the rewards are there in so many ways, Kate, not only did you host Sydney WorldPride and you had this macro-level of success, but it was also felt really personally as well at an individual level.

**Kate** [00:14:41] Yes, I think that's right. What really has taken me aback is yes, we made a lot of money for the state and tourism was certainly significantly higher post the pandemic. For me, it's the individual stories and how change can affect people from all different backgrounds. And I had people from, you know, the taxi industry coming up to me and saying, wow, all of our taxi drivers are busy, or our cafes or our restaurants are finally getting some foot traffic. And so my view and my goal for WorldPride was that all boats rise. And by that I mean everyone can achieve or have a sense of achievement or a sense of success. So a great example is instead of paying one artist or one DJ or drag queen or performer a large sum of money, what we wanted to do was, I suppose, spread that love. And if I could hire five DJs or five drag queens, or hire a different hotel or venue then we would. It was again, post-pandemic, particularly the arts industry had been suffering. A lot of performers and artists had been out of work, and so I really wanted to make sure that we could engage and employ as many people as we could.

**Shivani** [00:16:00] And what a cross industry impact you had. And it all started with your passion for teams and volunteering. I want to talk more about inclusive leadership, which you have had such an impact in, as you continue to be an incredible role model for visible, inclusive leadership, have you seen this encouraged more from within your communities to step up and to lead?

**Kate** [00:16:22] I think, we have. I certainly think particularly in the early days when people said we couldn't do it, and we showed that we, in fact, could do it as a community. I think that's given a lot of people ideas and opportunity and possibility to dream and think about what they could do. And so I was the co-chair of Mardi Gras for four years and then worked on WorldPride for three and a half years. And so I've now stepped down from all of my involvement with Mardi Gras, because I do think it's time for new thinking and new thoughts and new leadership to come in.

**Shivani** [00:16:57] Kate, you're such a visible leader out there for women and for people who belong to the LGBTQIA+ community. But who was the person for you that was visible, enabling you to come out and be all of who you are?

**Kate** [00:17:14] That's a great question because and a lot of people find this very surprising, when I was growing up, so I'm 42 now. When I was growing up, there weren't a lot of female leaders that were visible, and there certainly weren't any lesbian female leaders that were out and visible. And so I recall the first woman that I ever saw that was an out lesbian leader was Kerryn Phelps. She was the President of the AMA. And for me, I was at university in Adelaide at the time. That was really inspiring for me, because she was unapologetic about who she was. She was excellent and excelled in her profession, and she held one of the most well, she held the highest role in her profession at the time as the president. And I thought that was really something to aspire to. In terms of my career and going through my career, again, I think some people might find this interesting or unusual, but a lot of the people I looked up to and a lot of people who supported me during my career were white, straight, older men. And I think about those men regularly. Tim Reardon was one of them who was working at

Transport for NSW. I worked on a project for him, and then he ultimately moved to work for Gladys Berejiklian and the people of New South Wales. But those leaders were the ones who pulled me up, Jeff Roberts at the Greater Sydney Commission. So along the time and across my career, there are certainly many more out lesbians who are in visible leadership positions. But that wasn't always the way and it's changed significantly over the last 10 to 20 years.

**Shivani** [00:18:57] What do you think it means for the young women who are looking up to you and others who were so visible?

**Kate** [00:19:03] You know, ultimately it's up to the individual about whether they want to be out about their sexuality. And by no means am I saying that everyone should be. For me, it's been important because I didn't have that to look up to when I was younger. And I have been really, I suppose, blessed and very privileged to have younger lesbians approach me and say, thank you for being out. Thank you for being visible and unapologetic about who you are, because I feel now safe and visible myself, and know that it's not going to stop you from having a successful career or going on to do a variety of things. So I feel very privileged that I have been in that position. And if it means that I, for want of a better term, you know, a bit of a mentor, a bit of a visible leader for them, then that's okay by me.

**Shivani** [00:19:55] Your visibility has created a clear ripple effect for others, both above and beyond you. It seems very similar to your theory around teams to support those who are in front of you and those beside you. Kate, in your experience through your time, have we shifted the dial enough when it comes to diversity and inclusion?

**Kate** [00:20:14] It's a great question, and I'll give you a short story about my experience. As I said, I was the CEO for three and a half years, and I'm one of those lucky people who have I've only ever felt homophobia in the workplace once. But certainly and even, you know, as recently as these last couple of years, I come to work and I felt systemic sexism and misogyny regularly, if not on a daily basis. So I think as a community and as a society, we've got a long way to go in terms of gender equality, not even thinking of LGBTQI equality. But I know there's a lot of discussion around gender pay gap, and that's certainly something that the media pick up on. But systemic equality between men and women, particularly in the workplace, I still think we've got some way to go. In terms of LGBTQI equality, I came out when I was quite young, I was 16, and I've always been out in the workplace. And so I feel that there have been, you know, leaps and bounds since I came out. I've never hidden my sexuality, but certainly during my career, the way that I have been treated or the way that I've been seen as visible, absolutely has changed. I'd say in the last ten years, the inclusion or the discussion around the importance of inclusion and the importance of diversity has been exponential.

**Shivani** [00:19:48] Kate, I want to talk about the exponential growth now of you and your career, because you have had such a phenomenal career and have created such an impact, not just for yourself, but also from Australia and around the world through your work. So what's next for you, Kate? What big hairy challenges are you now sinking your teeth into?

**Kate** [00:22:04] One of the common themes or threads that you've probably heard is team. And so for me, team is everything. I love to be surrounded by values aligned, likeminded, intelligent, innovative, caring, kind, risk-taking individuals. And so the big hairy projects are around really sinking my teeth into something that is complex. I usually like working on projects that are either in their infancy, or projects that are flailing. I suppose for me, that challenge is really exciting. And so I'm doing some consulting at the moment, and I'm working on quite a large project, which will, I guess, watch this space. You'll see that shortly but again, it's a global project with a diversity of people and different backgrounds, but, you know, multidisciplinary projects where people come from the task or the solution in a different way.

**Shivani** [00:22:59] I can't wait to hear more about that and, I can't wait for you to be able to share more. In the meantime, Kate, at Leading Women, we are committed to activating women's leadership. What sage advice can you leave for us in the Toolkit?

**Kate** [00:23:13] Well, there's an analogy that I have been using for many years now, and I think it resonates with a lot of people because it talks about sport but the principle applies across corporate environments, too and that is one of a netball analogy, in fact. Netball is a unique sport. The court is divided into thirds, and there are players that aren't able to go in particular places on the court, and there are players that are supposed to do certain roles, whether it be the shooter or the keeper or the

centre. And so the best analogy I give to my teams is that it's like a netball court. In some respects, you stick to your lane, you do what you're best at, and in other respects you're not going to score a goal unless you use and work with your teammates. And so for me, it's such a great analogy because it speaks to the collaboration of scoring a goal or denying a goal, working with your teammates not one person can do it on their own.

**Shivani** [00:24:13] And speaking of teams, here's what I got from these incredible leadership lessons that you've imparted with me, Kate. And it's all about purpose fueled direction and collaboration, focusing on diversity and having passion with everything that you do because if you have clarity of purpose, that will in turn give you the courage of your convictions to go straight to the top where all boats can and must rise. Kate Wickett, thank you so much for being here with us today at Leading Women.

**Kate** [00:22:42] Thank you for your time. I feel very privileged to be a part of this. Thank you.

**Fiona** [00:24:47] Thanks for listening to Leading Women, where we shape what's next in female leadership together. So now, it's over to you. Follow Leading Women on your favourite podcast platform so you don't miss an episode, and find all the links, tips and tools discussed in our show notes.

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