



Leading Women podcast

CommBank Women in Focus

Episode 4: Nicole Christodoulou, CommBank ParaMatildas

Hosted by: Shivani Gopal, CEO and Founder, Elladex

Interviewee: Nicole Christodoulou, CommBank ParaMatildas

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

Nicole Christodoulou, CommBank ParaMatildas on unwavering grit, resilience and her philosophy of keeping it simple. Be captivated by Nicole's determination to realise her dreams of teaching and playing elite football, all while lifting others up along the way.

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 one that will stop you in your leadership tracks. It's an inspiring conversation that will stay with you a long time after this listen, inviting you to reflect on your own ability, integrity, and motivation. Nicole Christodoulou is a member of the CommBank ParaMatildas team, a secondary school teacher, an inspirational speaker, mentor and a force of nature. At just 21, while enjoying the prime of her life, Nicole suffered two debilitating strokes and had to learn how to walk, talk and rebuild her life from the ground up. With her unwavering grit and resilience, Nicole's mantra of expect big things from me and watch me deliver, saw her complete university while rising like a phoenix to elite athlete levels, representing her country in football and being selected as a leader by her peers. You'll be captivated by Nicole's undefeated spirit, her profound insights, and her philosophy of keeping it simple, being kind and elevating others while you rise. Nicole Christodoulou, welcome to Leading Women. It is so wonderful to have you here in person on Gadigal country.

Nicole [00:02:22] Thank you, Shivani, I'm really looking forward to having this conversation with you today.

Shivani [00:02:26] Oh, as am I, in fact, I'm already inspired and we haven't even gotten into the thick of our conversation as yet. Nicole, yours is a unique and spirited leadership journey. Can you share when your leadership was sparked and your unconventional path to here?

Nicole [00:02:43] So I was actually born a determined person. I have lived through it my whole life, I've always been, very competitive with everything I've done and just having experienced a stroke when I was 21 years old reflected this trait that I have, and it's led to a very successful recovery.

Shivani [00:03:04] Your determination has truly guided you through. In fact, Nicole, it feels like you have such an undefeated spirit, and it's such a journey of courage and conviction that you've led and by the way, congratulations on your success on and off the field. There is one powerful force that guides your life and your career, and that is that spirit of yours that we've just talked about. Can you tell us where this comes from and how we can all share in this positive philosophy of life?

Nicole [00:03:33] Yes, so growing up, I've really looked up to my family and my grandparents, which has helped with shaping this determination that I have. You know, they came to Australia following a

war. They've worked their way up from nothing. Okay, so just watching them and growing up around them, it's shaped the person that I am and it's really helped me with my determination, my motivation, my success and I really owe it to them.

Shivani [00:04:02] Your grandparents have definitely left a huge mark on you the way that you work and your work ethic. In fact, we were having this conversation early and you were telling me all about your philosophy of life is short. You just get one shot at life.

Nicole [00:04:17] Yes, so that is so true, so I did have two strokes at the age of 21, and it did open my eyes. And I now view the world very differently to the way I viewed it before I had the stroke. And one of the things that I've learned is that our life is very short, and you don't know what's waiting for you around the corner. So live every moment the way you want to live it. Live every day as it comes, you know, don't fortune tell and try to predict what's going to happen in the future because that may never happen so that's the spirit that I live with, that's the road that I follow every day of my life. It's led to me being quite successful in terms of my recovery, my footballing dreams, and I'm just so grateful that I'm here today sharing this story with you and other listeners as well.

Shivani [00:05:07] I'm so grateful that you are indeed here. Nicole, I want to understand more about your mental fortitude because as you were saying, you had a stroke so young and I could imagine there may have been parts of you that thought, you know what, I just want to give up. But for you, giving up was never an option, was it?

Nicole [00:05:25] No, I actually never thought, why me when I had the stroke. I was so happy that I was, you know, learning to walk. And I could move, start to move my fingers again. And I was learning how to run. And, you know, I was kicking a ball with the physio students in the hospital, it was a physio gym. It was just, it was the most incredible feeling. But, you know, the challenges started when I actually left the hospital and I had to face, the real world. So going to the shops was a bit more tricky. Crossing the road was a bit confusing, you know, the more I exposed myself to these things, the stronger I became, the more I exposed myself to volunteer work, working in primary schools for free just to build up that stamina. It really helped with my recovery, even though it took quite a while for me to get back to where I was to build that stamina and that strength.

Shivani [00:06:19] Nicole, the positive philosophy that you took in with your recovery of repetition, repetition, repetition, the way that you worked on yourself didn't just apply there, but it was also transferable for you into football. Tell us about that.

Nicole [00:06:34] Yes, so I did lots and lots of therapy throughout my rehabilitation days. And I remember one thing I learnt from my neuropsychologist. She showed us a video once of what happens in the brain when you learn a new skill and this is called neuroplasticity. And the more you practice something, the more you repeat an action, the bigger and stronger this connection gets in your brain. And I thought to myself, oh well, I swear, if I practice something over and over again and I practice it well, it's really going to help me improve whatever I'm trying to improve. And I had to improve everything from my walking to my, movement, to my kicking, my soccer, my reading, everything I had to do in my life, I had to really make sure that I perfected it so that I can perform it to the best of my abilities. You know this lesson that I learned just stuck with me and I dragged it with me to football as well, and even to my university degree, and it really helped me to become successful.

Shivani [00:07:37] Nicole, listening to you just gives me goosebumps and you are such a powerful teacher of focusing on not just the simple things, but how those simple and small things grow into really powerful, determining factors of your success. And I was just thinking that this mindset has led you to where you are today, representing the nation in the CommBank ParaMatildas, and that kicked off your next journey into football and team leadership where you created a safe space for other women in the team to be taken under your wing.

Nicole [00:08:09] Yes, so we had a group vote through one of our team camps for the leadership team. And a lot of the young ones, or most of the young ones got up and voted for me. And I was so, you know, grateful. And I felt very honoured that, you know, they thought that way about me. And I think it's got a lot to do with, you know, this determination, the motivation, the hard work and, you know, the work ethic that I have. And, you know, to see that they want to be led and guided by me, within the team environment it felt really good. So I'm happy that I can provide this to the team.

Shivani [00:08:45] What forces have shaped your leadership mindset?

Nicole [00:08:48] So apart from watching my grandparents and being inspired by them, I was told that I wasn't able to do many things that I wanted to do in my life prior my stroke. And I just listened to people and I thought to myself, you know what, who are you to shape my life and tell me what I can and can't do? I want to finish university. I'm going to do it if I want to, you know, I don't start something and leave it unfinished that's not how it works with me. I wanted to be someone, I've grown up in a, during school my school years being a high achiever, you know I'm not going to let a stroke take my life away from me. I was 21 years old. I wanted to make something out of myself. And that's how I found the CommBank ParaMatildas. I was told that I wasn't going to be able to work full-time again by one of my doctors. What did I do? I volunteered for a couple of years and I proved that I could work full-time and that led to the next thing that I'm about to speak about. University, I was told you had a stroke, Nicole, maybe just leave university and come back in ten years, if you still want to be a teacher that's another adversity that I faced. And I said, no, I'm not going to come back in ten years. I can do this. I've watched this video. I know if I practice hard enough, I can make it. So I worked super hard. I did lots and lots of therapies. My parents signed me up to a neuropsychological workshop. I practised so much. I spent a couple of years doing intensive rehab so that I can go out there and become a teacher because that was my dream. I spent, you know, my goal with physiotherapy was to be able to play football again, and I worked very hard in physio and I worked very hard at the gym so I can do it. And you know, my first football game wasn't easy. I'm never going to forget it. It was not an easy game. My leg was like dead weight and I could not run. I worked hard to get back into it, and I did have that game that I wanted, you know, that I longed for. And now I'm playing for my country, and it's the most surreal feeling. I played in front of my family for the first time in November, and they watched me get a gold medal in the Asia Cup and Player of the Tournament and that just means the whole world to me.

Shivani [00:11:09] You know, Nicole, that's just one of the things that really sets you apart. You had a stroke when you were 21 years old. You didn't let that physical adversity get you down, and then you didn't let the adversity of other people's limiting beliefs hold you back, because now you do play for your country. And not just that, when others said, hey Nicole, you can't finish university, you did and you stuck at it. In fact, it took you how long to complete your degree?

Nicole [00:11:42] It took me nine years in total to finish my university degree, and I was actually in my fourth year when I had the stroke. So those additional five years was just to finish off that last final year. And, you know, I remember telling someone that said to me that I can't, I turned around and said to them, watch me. I said, expect big things from me. And I just turned around and delivered, you know.

Shivani [00:12:08] Expect big things from me and then just deliver, if that is not leadership advice, I don't know what is. Nicole, we could finish this podcast right here and have everything that we need. So, Nicole, you've managed many challenges seemingly all at once, and I'm not sure if that was actually the case. How did you juggle everything? What was the secret?

Nicole [00:12:30] Now, the secret is actually not juggling things. It's actually creating checklists, prioritising what needs to be done. People can't actually multitask. It's been proven by science. I've seen it in a few Ted Talks. It's about just managing what needs to be done properly. You know, writing a checklist, working your way through what needs to be done first in order of prioritisation, and just being where your feet are, focusing on what you need to do, what needs to get done, and just working through it at your own pace. There's no rush, you know, no one's at you for completing your task. It's just, you know, you need to love what you do. You need to wake up every morning with a purpose because that's going to help you achieve your goals and get things done properly.

Shivani [00:13:21] And it sounds like that clarity of purpose is something that you fused into football as well, you know, laser-focused on your next move.

Nicole [00:13:29] Yes, so with the girls, I remember coming on during that second game against Japan in the Asia Cup and I came on as a sub, just before half time. And I could feel that stress on the pitch. And I just said to the girls, calm down, this is our game. Since when has Japan ever beat us? You know, we know how to play. We know how to win. Just relax, play your own game. Take one step at a time. And we actually came, we were down 2-1 that game and I jumped on and I feel like I sort of relaxed the girls a little bit during that game and we ended up winning 4-2.

Shivani [00:14:09] So much expectation on you, so many eyeballs on you, so much pressure and I know that whenever I'm under pressure and I say to myself, Shivani, just calm down, it is so much easier said than done. How do you take the words of calming and put it into practice?

Nicole [00:14:27] So I've worked quite a bit with a psychologist because, you know, being in a national team environment, it does get quite, you know, we are under pressure and he's taught me a couple of things. And one of them was the be where your feet are and that really does help me and he grounds me. He's taught me to, you know, put running cold water on my wrist to sort of ground me. Another thing we do with the yogic breaths. So it's breathing in for two, holding your breath in for three and then exhaling for four seconds and that really resets the nervous system. And he's told me that it calms you down. And it helps with me and whenever I use that. I'm actually on camp with the girls or in the middle of a tournament so it really works. And I'm very grateful to have learned all these things along the way.

Shivani [00:15:19] You really are such a learner. In listening to you, we talked about some of the secrets to your success and your leadership mindset and what sets you apart. And we talked about some of those, but it seems as though you actively seek out new pieces of information, new pieces of learning, so that you can get forward. And as you propel yourself forward, you propel others too. When sport is inclusive for people with disabilities, it also provides opportunities for innovation and recognises the range of diversity within the disability community itself. Nicole, when it comes to inclusion in sport, what's changed in your time and what does the future look like?

Nicole [00:15:57] I feel like I'm very fortunate that I've been, you know, living and growing up in a world that's slowly changing and it's becoming a lot more inclusive for those that have disabilities. And a little fun fact is that 4.4 million Australians actually have a disability. And, you know, people can have disabilities that are not visible. Like me, I've got a disability where people may look at me and they think that I'm, I've got my fingers doing quotes now, normal, you know, I look normal, but I don't feel normal a lot of the time. Some of the time, you know, I've had a really good recovery, but it doesn't mean that I'm back to the way I was, before my stroke, so I've got a bit of weakness in my left side, coordination issues, you know, reduced strength and I feel all these things. And I'm one of the only players in the team that weren't born with my disability, and I actually acquired it when I was much older, as I was 21 years old. So I know I've lived the best of both worlds, and I can assure you that it is quite tricky living, you know, with a disability and being on a team in a national team environment. I have that added stress sometimes where I know what my limbs are capable of. And when they don't, you know, perform the way I expect them to. I do get quite upset and, you know, emotional on the field so that my teammates don't feel that, they don't have that.

Shivani [00:17:27] Nicole, you talked a lot about invisible disabilities and advocating for yourself. If one of our listeners is also experiencing an invisible disability, how might they go about advocating for themselves?

Nicole [00:17:38] Now, there is actually a program that's happening globally around the world where there are lanyards or wristbands, and you can see these, you know, wherever you go of a sunflower with a green background on it and this just symbolises that someone has a hidden disability. Now this is called the Hidden Disability Sunflower program. And if you do see someone wearing this lanyard or wearing a wristband, this person has a hidden disability. And you know, we shouldn't be judging. And I feel lots and lots of people have actually judged me based on the way I look. And it's happened quite a few times in the last ten years and I've been abused. You know, it's quite sad to hear about this and to experience this, but I have been spoken to not in a nice way, because people think that I'm actually not disabled when I am, you know, there are days where I find it hard to walk at times. And I remember there were a few times where I was struggling to walk back to the car after work, and I do park in a disabled spot because I've got a permit as well, and I find it very important that the people around us understand that people live with hidden disabilities. And to keep an eye out for, you know, the hidden disability sunflower. Just be wary of that and just be kind, you know, support people around you. If you see someone struggling, stop and help them. Another important point is don't judge others because you don't know what they're going through. You feel like you might know someone, but in reality you may only know like the tip of the iceberg. You won't understand what people are going through in their daily lives and what their struggles may be so just be kind and supportive and yes, just help the people around you.

Shivani [00:19:30] Such timeless advice, Nicole, at Leading Women we're committed to activating women's leadership, what sage advice, in addition to all the incredible teaching moments you've already given us, Nicole, can you leave for us in the Toolbox for leadership?

Nicole [00:19:44] So I feel that one of the most important things isn't that hard. You know, it's just to be kind. Be kind to everyone around us. Be kind to the people that you feel may be having a bad day. One of the basic human needs is love and belonging. And this is something that I really need people to understand because I actually taught this as a teacher to my students at school for a few years now that love and belonging is a basic human need, and we crave it as people. So, you know, kindness, being accepted, being celebrated, these are all things that we need to help each other with and support each other with so that we can grow as a community and, you know, hatred and arrogance and, you know, being unkind isn't helping anyone. It's just adding fuel to the fire. So, you know, just be kind, it's not hard.

Shivani [00:20:49] Just be kind, leadership or not, it doesn't cost you anything and those are actually your words, Nicole. I've had the wonderful opportunity of having you as my teacher over this last half hour and I too have learned so much. And here's what I've taken from your toolbox, Nicole and that is to always think on the bright side of life. It's about gratitude, not why me and if you want to be the best teacher that you can be for yourself, you should because only you can do it. You owe it to yourself, and you do it via repetition, repetition, repetition, and seeking out sage knowledge because you and only you can play your own game. Nicole Christodoulou, thank you so much for joining us here today at Leading Women.

Nicole [00:21:36] Thanks for having me here and I hope that our listeners walk away having learned something new today.

Shivani [00:21:42] We all have, thank you, Nicole.

Fiona [00:21:46] 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.

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.