



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

**Episode 5: Mary Hamilton on embracing transitions and tenacity in leadership**

**Hosted by: Shadé Zahrai  
Interviewee: Mary Hamilton**

**Featuring: Jinny Olney, Head of Women in Focus, CommBank**

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This episode, Shadé Zahrai interviews Mary Hamilton. Mary is the CEO of Hugh Hamilton Wines, Australia's oldest wine family. She is also a Board Member of the McLaren Vale Grape Wine and Tourism Association and Board Member of the Women's and Children's Hospital Foundation. She was also the Worldwide Business Director of McCann Erickson.

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**Jinny [00:00:03]** Welcome to Leading Women, your place to share and celebrate real stories and access the tools and resources you need to activate your leadership. I'm Jinny Olney, Head 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.

**Shadé [00:00:32]** Welcome to Leading Women, the place to ignite your leadership and elevate equality. I'm your host Shadé Zahrai, and today's conversation is blended with energy, sparking thought around the confidence of standing out and just going for it and what a joy to welcome Mary Hamilton, a remarkable woman with a leadership path like no other. She'll ignite your imagination with her stories of tenacity, sideways transitions and embracing mistakes to find your place in leadership. Thanks so much for joining us on Leading Women, Mary, dialing in from McLaren Vale in South Australia.

**Mary [00:01:15]** Thanks, Shadé, I always love everything that Women in Focus do. It is such a high standard. So it's wonderful to be with you. I feel privileged to be asked. Thank you.

**Shadé [00:01:26]** And we're honoured to have you with us so thank you again. So, Mary, you've had one incredible leadership journey. Can you share with us an overview and then we will deep dive into a few of your unforgettable stories?

**Mary [00:01:37]** You know, I think that my journey started as a little girl. I was always dressing up and pulling out pages of gorgeous Vogue magazines and holding all the ads together in special folders. And I think that led me where I went because I went to school and I did work experience with a very specific goal in mind. And then I found that to achieve that goal, I had to go to university, which I actually didn't want to do. And then that led me to sort of then finding my path again, which was my little girlhood dream goal and my work experience goal, which got me over into advertising in Sydney. And then somehow I have ended up back here in McLaren Vale working in the family wine business. So I have been on quite a journey. Some of those things weren't intended and some were. And everything's kind of, I think, had its purpose along the way, which I guess is what life is like a bit, isn't it?

**Shadé [00:02:36]** It is and sometimes those things that are not intended, the paths that we never thought we'd go on end up teaching us the most and help us find the path we're meant to be on. I'd like to know more about your university experience because I know it was very unique and you really got a great return on investment. Can you tell us more about this chapter in your life and how it helped shape your inclusive leadership style that really launched your career and carved your deep sense of equality?

**Mary [00:03:02]** Yes, well, like I said, you know, I had this goal. I wanted to be in advertising and I just wanted to leave school and go straight into it. And I spoke to a friend who was heavily involved in the career and she said, look, it's very competitive these days. You'd be best served going to uni and getting yourself a degree. You'll be much more hire-able if you do that. So I thought, right damn, I didn't really actually want to do that, but I'll go and enroll in a business course and I'll major in marketing, which was what she suggested. So I'm enrolled in business and I was in my first year and the way I was going to treat uni was to just turn up, do the lecture, do the tute and go again as fast as possible and spend most of my time up actually on Rundle Street drinking espresso and trying to be cool up there

and nowhere near the campus. And then one night I was sitting in one of my business lectures and there was a guy who was in my year behind me, and he tapped me on the shoulder in the break and said, hey, Mary, look, I want to be the student president and I've got to get a few running mates together to be able to do it. You know, would you come and do it with me? I said, no way. I am your non-here kind of uni student. There is no way I'm interested in anything like that. He said, oh, come on, look he is very sort of persuasive and pestering. So he probably had some good DNA for a student politician and he was very persistent and he said, just come with me after the lecture. It won't take long, just come down, check it out and you probably won't have to do anything anyway. Oh, right, so off I went after the lecture and before I knew it, he had really kind of stung me on this one. I am giving a pitch speech for why I want to be elected. This was definitely not what I'd planned but it was one of those kind of moments where you find yourself on stage before you'd even kind of realised you were. And somehow I left that night with a portfolio within the student representative body and I thought, how the hell did that happen? And then it transpired that it was actually wonderful. I ended up with this great office on campus that was my own, where I could just kind of hang out and study, which was terrific. And then I found that I was actually really enjoying the whole student political thing. I got this education portfolio, which meant that I had to represent students in and advocating for them to the university for things that were unfair. And I loved that side of things. But we were a university where the SRC and the union were combined. So it also gave me access to all of the commercial operations, like running the bars and the cafes. And I found that really stimulating as well. So I decided I actually really rather like this. I think I'm going to have a bit more of a crack at it, so I'm going to go for president. And that was actually in terms of trying to get into advertising that was by far the most meaningful thing I could have done because I was really running a marketing campaign and an advertising campaign. And I say that because you have to make all these decisions to get elected, which is just all around promotion and how you place yourself and how you take an idea to market and who your target audience is and how you influence them. So I found that, you know, I was picking logos and colour themes and all of that, but I was also doing this really great work, which was learning how to speak to people and how to bring them on a journey with me. And that was, I think, probably what I always loved about the idea of advertising is that you're actually trying to influence people and you can do that in sort of so many different ways in life. What came out of the student sort of politics side was that, yes, we ended up getting elected myself and 70, I put together 70 running mates so that we, if we got elected, would have colleagues on campus that we could actually make change with. And it was a brilliant campaign. It was very upbeat. It was very colourful. And I learnt a lot about how to be persuasive through doing that. And if I had just thought that I should just go and talk to my business mates and ask them to vote for me, it would have flopped quite spectacularly. It was really about finding groups of people on campus who were passionate and who wanted their voice heard through their student organisation and getting them to run with me. And so I ended up sort of finding groups of nurses or groups of international students or Aboriginal students who wanted their voice heard and asking them to be part of my campaign team and actually take positions. And then, of course, they would influence their group to vote for them, which meant that it was going to get us elected. So it was an amazing experience, actually, and probably more of a marketing degree than I could have actually ever got just by signing up for a bachelor.

**Shadé** [00:07:25] And it's funny how that sometimes happens, where we go down a path we say yes before we're ready, as you clearly did. You just went along. You must have had that very persuasive voice in your ear saying, just come along, Mary. And then you discovered there was so much more to it. And I think one of the beautiful parts is that you also discovered the beauty in really learning how to take people on the journey, especially those who have less of a voice and who are less visible, you know, instead of going directly with the business students who would have been the easy bet, you actually found a way to allow other people to have a voice and then to drive their agendas as well, which is brilliant. Now, I know you've had an unconventional start to your career and you've had some pivotal moments where you were even blindsided in your leadership, but it didn't throw you off course and you maintained that go for broke attitude. So as many of us are navigating elements that are out of our control, how do we create that same mindset with the resilience to go with it?

**Mary** [00:08:21] Well, I was so focused on the idea that I wanted to be in advertising after all it had been the thing that made me go off and do a degree I didn't actually really want to do. So by the time I actually had nailed those statistics and could take my piece of paper and say, all right, I've got it, let me in. There was really not much of an ad scene left in Adelaide, and so I had to go somewhere else. So I booked myself a plane ticket to Sydney and I was going to go and sleep on a friend's floor in Darlinghurst. And my Dad said to me, what are you going to do? And I said, well, I'm going to Sydney. I'm going to just find myself a job in advertising and I'll give myself a week. And if I can't get a job in a week, then I will just go and do some waitressing or something like that. So I went over there and apparently North Sydney was the place where all the agencies were. So I just started walking around North Sydney and basically just door knocking to try and get a start. And I went to this agency that was right basically looking over Sydney Harbour. And I went up and I saw the chief executive and had a conversation with him and he really put me on the spot. He sort of said, okay, you tell me five things that make yourself impressive enough to get a job. And I just

thought, wow, that's quite a challenge. I hadn't actually planned for that one and just pulled them out of my sock, basically. And then he didn't want me to settle in for too long. He said, okay, here's the deal. I'm not giving you a job, but I'm giving you a foot in the door so you can come here and you can be in that office next door and you can do some research for about five weeks or so and that's your foot in the door. And I looked at next door and it was the adjacent office to him except bigger. And it was the most remarkable thing I had ever seen coming from Adelaide to Sydney and then walking into this enormous office with these huge glass picture windows, just looking over Sydney Harbour Bridge, the Opera House, the whole works. And I'm going to be sitting in here as my foot in the door. This is incredible. So then no worries, I came the next day and off I go on my research job. And everybody in the agency thought assumed that because I'm inhabiting the chairman's office who was away overseas for three months that I must be some gun that they've employed for consumer research or something. So people were coming to me with their campaign ideas and sort of saying, so Mary, what do you think about this? You know, this is what I'm thinking about doing for this brand. And I'm thinking, oh, that sounds fantastic and telling them that I think that their feedback sounds really wonderful. And they just assumed that I was not the lowest paid position in the building, which I absolutely was. So it was a bit of a funny start but I knew that I was on the sands in the hourglass were falling fast. He'd told me you're only here for five weeks, so make the most of it. So I decided that I would learn everything I could in that agency. And it was interesting. One of the things that was fascinating is that they had all of their direct marketing people sort of buried at the bottom of the building with HR and Finance well out of the way of any of the sort of the glamorous zones of the boardrooms and where all of the clients would hang out. And I had funny conversations with the guys down there and I said, yes, we're the people who are buried at the bottom of the basement. We're in direct marketing that's how it's kind of seen around here. And I reflect on that now because so much of my business now is absolutely dependent on direct marketing. And it is totally the way marketing really runs now is direct consumer. So those people who thought that they were, you know, with the maligned and that the guerrillas were at the top is absolutely done a back flip. But despite that, I went around and looked for a job and I ended up getting a great entry-level job at an agency called Ogilvy and Mather and I was very fortunate, I think, because it had wonderful women running it. So the CEO was a woman, a really smart woman, and my boss was a fantastic, fantastic advertising brain and a wonderful person, and she handpicked me and she saw something in me. And I'm really grateful for that because I just had the best coach you could ever hope for as a start in a job. And I'd worked for some pretty unpleasant people in various jobs prior to that. So this was just a blessing to work with her. And I just learnt such great disciplines and ways of doing business ethically in that business. I had a real respect for strategy, which has left me with a lifelong love of strategy in business. And it's something that I try to always bring into our business. So I was very fortunate, Shadé, to get that first go at things.

**Shadé** [00:12:15] What an amazing first foot in the door it was as well from the amazing office and having the five weeks and then moving into the position where you had the female mentorship and the lessons around the importance of strategy and ethics, which is not something you typically hear about in terms of lessons that you can learn. So it's wonderful to have had that so early on, during that time was there anything in your mind that kept you going in terms of goals that you wanted to achieve, or what was your main drive when you were really early on in your career?

**Mary** [00:12:44] I think at that stage I was just really grateful to be able to learn so much from good people and to see wonderful, important brands and important campaigns just coming to fruition that was a privilege. But, you know, it didn't last all that long in hindsight because, you know, life is change. And that changed pretty quickly because not long after really not long after being there that agency went into a merger situation with another agency. And it really was probably one of my first true examples of culture, what happened next. And what that was that this beautiful agency with all of these fabulous women and great ethics and credentials and ways of looking strategically at brands ended up, I suppose, being sort of taken over by another agency that was a real boys club. And the culture could not have been more different. It was not a great place for women. There were no examples when we arrived as a group of women who had taken senior roles in that agency. Most of the women were PAs and secretaries. They were a few account directors, but not many. And there was no real sort of dedication to strategy. There was no strategic planning department or strategic planners. And it became apparent that women who wanted to go somewhere with their careers were going to be trying to fight city hall and weren't going to win. So they should probably start looking somewhere else. Now, that wasn't told to us, but everybody could see that was the case. So I decided that I would certainly hold on to my job. And I wasn't senior enough to be sort of picking and choosing about where I was going to go at that stage. But it was in my mind that I needed to be open to going somewhere else and not before too long. So I was working on a piece of business, which I have to say, and I hope that it wouldn't offend anyone for me to say this. It was pharmaceuticals. And I found pharmaceuticals really dry and really boring. It was so much about the ingredients on the pack. And if you want to go and pull out your pack, you know some of the headache pills that are around the place and have a look at the ingredients that is not a barrel of fun. I like things with a bit more colour and movement than that, but it was my footpath to be able to go somewhere else. And so I

was taken on by another fabulous agency, McCann Erickson, with brilliant brands for my pharmaceutical knowledge. So I moved agencies and was working there. And then one day they put out and I wasn't enjoying it. I have to say I really wasn't enjoying it. I actually found that my health was even suffering. I think I just felt like I was not the right fit and almost a bit of a fish out of water. And possibly I think I was suffering from a bit of imposter syndrome in that I didn't feel like I was right for it. I felt it made me feel fraudulent. So I was desperate to stay in advertising, but not stay in pharmaceuticals. One day, the chief executive put out a call and said, is there anybody in this business that knows anything about wine? Now, I'd come from a wine family, been around wine all my life, my grandparents, it was just so much part of life. It was just in my blood. It was by osmosis. And so I said, oh, yes, you know, I know a bit about wine. And he just grabbed me. They must have been hugely desperate that there was no one else who had put up their hand and they said, oh, great, excellent, all right. We are establishing a pitch team; will you be on the team? And I said, oh, okay, yes, sure but I've got one condition. And they said, what's that? And I said, if we win the pitch, I want to run the account. Now, I was really at sort of like, I wouldn't, bit too generous to say middle management, I was junior-ish and the CEO just looked at me sort as if I cracked a joke that he wasn't quite sure if I delivered the punch line fully or not. You? You want to run the account if we win it? I mean, this would be a big global account. I said, yes, I know. And I want to run it. And he said, oh, let me get back to you on that one. And I think that they really didn't have too many other options. And so they said yes. And so I was determined we were going to win this damn account. And we put together a great pitch and we did. We won. And it was a real joint effort. But we got this account, which was Southcorp, and Southcorp had the most amazing brands, just a treasure trove of brands. And so it was such an exciting time because we got to work on the brand strategy. I was back again happily in an agency where strategy was really important, working with wonderful strategic planners. And we got to carve out the strategies for all these wine brands. And I still see that these strategies for some of those brands are in place today and that was fabulous. And the thing that put the cherry on top was that in Australia in the ad scene, you're often taking the creative and strategic work from New York and London, this was the very first brand that they had in-house where we were going to design the creative and strategic work and give it to London and New York. So that made it all the more sweet. So, yes, it was a great time.

**Shadé** [00:17:01] What a wonderful story, too. And I love how there was that moment where you essentially just put your hand up. You said yes before you were ready and said yes, if we win this client, I want to take over the campaign. I want to be that person. And it links back to that experience you had at university as well, where you just said, well, I'm going to go for it. And it's amazing what can come when you just put your hand up and back yourself and say, I'm going to find a way to make this work, whatever that looks like, I will do it.

**Mary** [00:17:26] Yes and can I say I probably maybe that was just one of the positive things that I took from the boys club was that I stood back in awe watching those guys the way they would operate. And there was a fair bit of testosterone and machismo in that agency. They would jump off the cliff way before they were ready to jump, you know, half baked, really, to be honest, in some cases. And it just made me think you don't always have to be ready to ship to be able to ship. You know, you can sometimes say, I think I've got it and I'll just go for it. I wouldn't suggest that is my MO all the time. I think that it's a female thing that we often feel as though we've got to be really well rehearsed to go for stuff. It's maybe be a little bit of a female curse. And I think it's because we just we've got great emotional intelligence often that we feel as though we really should be the real deal. But I think that can also be a handicap, because sometimes you get passed over because you just didn't jump into the void.

**Shadé** [00:18:29] You know, offline, you told me that the Black Sheep is your vision and that it's also the common thread running through your leadership career and the bloodline of your family business. Can you re-tell the story of your aha Black Sheep moment and how you've turned it into your brand ethos?

**Mary** [00:18:45] Well, I was working still in advertising and marketing and I got a phone call from my father in McLaren Vale and he said, listen, I need some marketing, some marketing help. And I said, oh, Dad, I can write you a marketing plan if that's what you need. He was running his business. He's sort of gone out on his own from the bigger family wine business and had kind of got going again. And he said, no, I think I need something a bit more than that. I think, you know, I need, you know, somebody in the business doing some marketing work for me. I said, okay, well, look, you know, throw me a project and I can do it part time from the eastern states. I started doing it and I found that I really loved the nature of small business. It was just so different to being in these big corporate organisations. And I just, I loved it. I loved the variety and how there was a challenge every day. And it was across all facets of the business. And one of my first things that I did is I looked at his labels and I said to him, Dad, you know, we've got a problem here. These are so boring; you're never going to stand out with them. And his feathers were ruffled. He took it a little bit personally; I had to say, because it had his signature on the front. And he said, oh, you marketing people, you always just want to come in and change the wine labels, don't you? Dad, I think that they do need to change and I've got an idea. And I turned his bottle over and there in the little corner of his back label with this microscopic little

black sheep. And I said, Dad, this tiny black sheep, this is kind of I see this as your little secret sign off to yourself, your little in-joke with yourself that you're the black sheep of this large, quite conservative wine family. And he said, yes that's exactly what it is. I said, well, why not be proud about that? Why don't we make that the brand? Why doesn't that become kind of the moniker for the whole business? And we'll put that, let's bring that into the front paddock and put that on the label that will make them a lot more interesting. Oh, you couldn't do that, no way, you couldn't do that. And I said, oh, I think it's got legs. And he said, well, you keep my signature on there, won't you? And I said, I'm not sure, let's just work through this bit by bit. And so we ended up creating the whole brand around the black sheep. And it was perfect for me as a storyteller and a marketing person and a branding person. It was the door that opened, the clouds parted and for, you know, all the time that I've now been working in the business, it's never missed a beat because it's authentic. It's his story. And then what I found is that it wasn't only his story. We had black sheep throughout the generations of our family and wine who had done these crazy, quirky things and they had lived like black sheep as well. So it just has been a magic pudding of ideas to be able to just keep storytelling and doing it in a way that is really authentic and real for the brand. So I never feel as though I have to concoct anything or make us, you know, into size 10 boots when we really only a size 2. It just fits because it's real. And so that was my start in working in the family business. And I am now 16 years or so in and have never looked back. And the black sheep is just the perfect DNA to do everything that I need to do in the business.

**Shadé** [00:22:17] It's the perfect way of embodying this concept of how can I be different? And as you said, how can we be authentic, how can we be real? How can we make sure that we are presenting everything that we are? And you shared with us offline a discussion that you had with a career coach, which seemed to be quite pivotal for you. I'd love for you to share that with us, because I think there are such powerful messages in that.

**Mary** [00:22:40] Actually it wasn't a career coach, it was the vice chancellor of the university when I was the student president and he was leaving and maybe I was finishing up my term, I think, and I went to him for some career advice. I think I was finishing and going to be out on the big wide world. And I said to him, look, can you give me some advice on how to tackle leaving uni and going out and starting my career? And he said, okay, I have to ask you a really fundamental question, Mary. Do you want to be organisational or do you want to be entrepreneurial? And I had no answer for him. I'd never even thought about the question and but boy, did it drill a hole in my head, you know, I just I was never going to forget that. It just haunted me, the question and why didn't I know the answer? Am I? Do I want to be organisational? I don't know. I just didn't know. And when I look back, what I did is I became organisational. I went off; I got into big advertising agencies. It was very corporate. It was very structured. And I got great things from that. And I wouldn't undo that for a moment because I learnt lots about disciplines and the ways of doing business and stuff that I use every day still just a way of thinking about things from a strategic point of view and that comes out of being in organisations, I think. But when I came into the wine industry and started working here with my father and now he's not so much in it anymore, I just realised, aha, that was the answer to the question. I want to be entrepreneurial. And that was probably why ultimately advertising didn't really fit with me long-term because I think what I really was craving was, yes, all of the strategy, all of the understanding about why humans do what they do, which I loved, how that was expressed through advertising. But I really actually wanted to do it in a small entrepreneurial way with a product of my own where I was actually having the direct relationship with my customers. And that's what I do now every day. And I do it the black sheep way, which is kind of like, you know, James Bond's got a licence to kill. I've got this licence to thrill because the Black Sheep just gives me ultimate permission to be able to do whatever I want. As long as people say, yes, okay, that's cool, we'll come along for that ride. And so, you know, I've taken the marketing mix of product and promotion and price and distribution, and I've turned on its head in my own business because I do it the Black Sheep way, which means that no one can actually really totally copy me or that and there's nothing artificial about it. It's really real because it comes from a place of what is genuine to us and who we are.

**Shadé** [00:25:26] I think that concept of a black sheep is so powerful. I mean, not only in business, but even as women, because you said it just now. You said, you know, the licence to thrill, which I love, but it's given you permission to do what you want. You're not waiting for that permission from anyone else. You're not waiting for someone to say, yes, okay, you can go and do this now. It's really asking yourself what is authentic, what is real, what can I do differently? And then you just go and do it. And I think for women everywhere, all the women on the journey with us, it's almost asking ourselves, how can we be the black sheep? How can we take that mindset into everything that we do? So, Mary, as you know, at Leading Women, we're committed to activating women's leadership. Our unique impact is that each amazing guest offers a tangible tool that's helped them to ignite their leadership so that we can add that into our leadership toolbox to elevate equality and redefine our business landscape. What are you adding for us today?

**Mary** [00:26:20] Well, look, you know, there are so many great things, but I think it's got to be something around the black sheep kind of effect. And that's maybe what I'll call the black sheep effect. And so I think my contribution to your toolbox would be to take because I come from the marketing degree, which we've talked about as well, is let's take the four Ps that everyone who's done a marketing degree or a diploma or has even just gone and done a short course knows about, which is promotion, product, price and place. I'm going to add an extra one for good measure because I think it's super important and that is people. So I'm going to have the five Ps of the black sheep effect. And what this is it's about knowing who you are. Who you appeal to, what your purpose is, what you offer, and then turning each of those five Ps on their head and doing it through the black sheep way, which gives you ultimate power to be able to change things up and do it the way you want to do it.

**Shadé** [00:27:33] And what a beautiful story to end on that highlights this idea of this black sheep way of thinking that you said this and I loved it, mistakes are wonderful. They show you something you've never seen before. And this is really what it's about for women on the journey to embrace that by being the black sheep, by having that mindset, we need to be open to the mistakes that are going to come, but they can be wonderful. Now, Mary, thank you so much for your energy for your engaging and relatable stories. I could sit here all day listening to your stories. There are so much in them. I can't thank you enough for joining us and giving us so many tools in this powerful mindset reframe that will help so many of us.

**Mary** [00:28:12] It's been a great pleasure, Shadé, thank you so much for asking me.

**Shadé** [00:28:20] What a thoroughly entertaining conversation with Mary opening up on her span of leadership and how her say yes and then work it out attitude works out. Looking forward to you joining us next episode. Until then, share this episode with the women leaders you know, and let's activate leadership together.

**Jinny** [00:28:41] Thanks for listening to Leading Women where we can all activate leadership 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 [#leadingwomensaus](https://twitter.com/leadingwomensaus)