



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

**Episode 8: Tanya Denning-Orman on blending culture and leadership.**

**Hosted by: Shadé Zahrai  
Interviewee: Tanya Denning-Orman**

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

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This episode, Shadé Zahrai interviews Tanya Denning Orman. Tanya is the Director of Indigenous Content for the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) Australia. She was also the Commissioning Editor and Director of Content for the National Indigenous TV.

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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 are 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 blends culture and leadership with the joy of storytelling, the importance of bringing your whole self to work, and the power of Indigenous people being positively included in the Australian media landscape. And what a delight to welcome our guest, Tanya Denning-Orman, Director of Indigenous Content at SBS. Tanya shares how respect, inclusion and a focus on the legacy we are leaving should factor in every decision we make. Thanks for joining us on Leading Women, Tanya, dialing in from Sydney on the Nations of the Eora. So, Tanya, with your unique upbringing and the rich stories of your family and mob, we would love to hear your leadership journey from the bush to the city and everywhere in between.

**Tanya** [00:01:28] Oh, Wadda Mooli, which is hello in Birri Gubba, one of my nations that I belong to, which is far up north around the Whitsundays.

**Shadé** [00:01:38] Beautiful, it's so wonderful to have you here. And we know you've had one incredible leadership journey. Can you share with us an overview and then we'll deep dive into some of your unforgettable stories?

**Tanya** [00:01:49] Well, I guess I'm an accidental leader, if I can say that, I was very passionate about becoming a journalist. Actually that was my ambition a good 20 odd or more years ago, feeling my age, you know, really passionate about storytelling and my craft. To this day, I'd still say I'm a journalist and a producer of content. However, with that passion, I really wanted to tell stories, not just what was happening in the world around me or with Australians, but particularly the stories that were happening to Indigenous Australians, primarily because you

can see our stories. I couldn't see my community represented at all, let alone when we were represented on screen. It wasn't the world I was growing up in or it was quite a negative perception or negative portrayal, which wasn't telling the full story. So I kept on working towards becoming a journalist and filmmaker. However, an opportunity came along to help. You know, I set my own production company before this occurred but there was an opportunity to have a part of the very establishment of the Indigenous Channel and ITV back in 2007. And that then led to my journey, so to speak, of corporate life and management and then understanding what it is to really drive a business and drive people and what was a part-time gig because I always thought I'd get back to storytelling, you know, 2007, 13, 14 odd years later, I'm still here.

**Shadé** [00:03:34] A sign that you're loving what you're doing and you're meant to be where you are.

**Tanya** [00:03:38] I definitely love it. It's a challenging environment. Media is constantly changing, as we all know, dealing with all sorts of aspects of, you know, global platform giants and the rest so it's a really interesting industry to be in. So I feel like I've got the best of both worlds being able to create and problem solve every day in my position as a leader in the media environment, an executive in television and media in Australia but also as a storyteller. So I've been able to mesh my love into this pretty incredible career, 20 odd years jumping from ABC to SBS and now being a part of crafting what I believe is an incredible contribution to Australian viewers or Australians in general to have access to a platform that tells the story of the oldest continuous culture on the planet at any minute of the day.

**Shadé** [00:04:36] So, Tanya, let's dive into that first love of yours that you've introduced us to, this idea of journalism and really telling stories, giving a voice to the voiceless and allowing visibility where they may not be any. So what was it about this industry that really inspired you to make your impact here?

**Tanya** [00:04:52] Oh, look, I am an 80s kid. I grew up with a television box that was the centrepiece of anybody's household. And with one or two channels, it was your window to the world. And it was as much as I loved it, I questioned it. You know, I would sit back loving, watching, you know, programs like, you know, a country practice or flying doctors and the like. But it would soon be pretty obvious when talking about my community and how Indigenous people are represented, whether it was on drama or whether it was within the news. So it was the news that was, you know, my dad, we always had the wireless on, as we say, we always have news on. And I never see the world through the perspective of my world, Indigenous people. And one day I saw a beautiful Black woman reading the news and it really changed me, I guess. And she knows who she is, Rubina Colbie. She was not only reading the news, it was the authority that she had. And so for me, growing up in a mining town in central Queensland, most of the role models I had, where it is a very male dominated town, so people who were in careers were miners or railway workers or shopkeepers or schoolteachers like I didn't see other examples of professions in this small town in central Queensland. And so for me to see, this Black woman reading the news, there was a shift in my thinking. And if she could do it, I could possibly do it so that mixed with my passion of justice, so to speak, I always question the world. And I'm forever grateful that my parents and grandparents grew me up in a way that I could question what was happening around me. And then seeing an Aboriginal woman, you know, really cements to me and I talk about it today, what seeing what you can be and the power of that. But also when I would go to school, talk in the community, how the opinions of Australians around me who I love dearly but they had this opinion over my community. And so it

was always a challenge to me because, mostly because, I thought people were missing out. As a child, I was thinking, well, they're missing out on so much, I'm getting to do all this incredible stuff with my family. And, you know, it was just, it was incredible to me, the hatred or the anger or the, you know, the way people spoke about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. And so then when I could see that this Aboriginal woman was reading the news, I just set myself on that path that well, if she can do it, I can as well. And I went to university and I kept on knocking on the door of the ABC that was my role modeling where I really believed in public broadcasting and public storytelling and the truth. And for me, I felt ABC was that place. Of course, I'm at SBS now but I didn't have SBS up in Queensland at the time when I was growing up. But for me it was about public broadcasting and the importance of that. And I didn't get a job for a couple of years. I just kept on knocking on the door and I had some sort of degree of persistence because it was a time whether it was really challenging to get a job in media. And I had to leave my community and I had to come all the way down to Sydney, which for young Maori kid at the time, even though as a university graduate, it was a huge deal to come to the other side of the country to pursue this passion, which, you know, to this day I never regret. It's challenging of having to you know, there is a lot of my time in my life where I've lived away from home now, but I feel passionate about the new family and storytelling that I'm a part of, you know, at the Indigenous channel, there's about 60 of us. Most of us are from First Nations, people from all over the country. And I get to share and connect with them in a different way. So that's the joy of my position, which doesn't mean I don't miss home, Queensland, particularly after a year of COVID but it's a privilege. And I still to this day I feel very honoured to be in this position. And just as passionate as I was back as a kid growing up in central Queensland wanting to correct the wrongs of Australian television, we've come a long way. But I feel we've still got a long way to go. But I do feel there's light happening. And I guess I always think of another 80s program, the never ending story. And, you know, you got the oracles there and the lights coming out. And we've got this incredible opportunity as Australians where there is a shift in this landscape happening. And I feel so excited to be a part of it.

**Shadé** [00:10:06] And what a beautiful story filled with so many personal experiences that you had. And the sense that I get is that because of the experiences you've had early on in life, your background and your passions infuse everything that you do from your personal life to your professional life. And there were a couple of things I'd love to call on. You highlighted that, you know, if you don't know something exists, it's so easy for these prejudices and these biases to come into play. And that's why, you know, what I'm hearing is your love of storytelling allows you to capture these stories and make them public to educate. And you said to correct the wrongs so I can sense your passion as you're speaking about that and this early experience you had when you were 10 years old and you saw the Indigenous newsreader who you just almost instantly looked up to, not only in her ability to tell stories, but you could see yourself in that. And it highlights the power of having role models as children and even as women as we go through our careers. There's a lot of literature and research around the psychological theory, the motivational theory of role modeling, and how if we don't have someone that we can look to who seems like us, sounds like us, we resonate with, we subconsciously lean out. So then the flip of this is that we also never know who are inspiring because that newsreader at the time probably had no idea that she was inspiring you at that pivotal moment to then almost follow on that pathway and look at the incredible impact that you've had.

**Tanya** [00:11:31] Yes, no, just absolutely, going back in that moment and seeing her and I had the privilege that I was able to talk to her about it years later of what she did. And she took it in her stride, as she did. She's an incredible

lady. But to go to your point about saying what you can potentially be and role modeling, I'm so passionate about that also because the reason NITV, National Indigenous Television exists was a recommendation from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody, which was tabled in parliament a good 20 odd years ago, recommended the power and the importance of Indigenous people being able to see themselves represented positively on screen. And I've been really advocating as an Indigenous channel that we had not only programs of, you know, inspiring Indigenous Australians, but also children programming so that young Indigenous people actually could hear themselves and see themselves included in society. And it's something that is so important that this was a massive Royal Commission that Australian government commissioned and that piece of, you know, one of the few recommendations that did get implemented. And here we are today and we do get beautiful letters coming in from audiences all the time. I love the ones that we get from schoolteachers over the impact of what the Indigenous channel has had, particularly on the classroom. And I think not only is that special for Indigenous children, but also for all Australian kids, because not only do we want to see someone who looks like us or talks like us, but how important it is for us. And I guess the reconciliation it is to see someone who doesn't look like us and doesn't talk like us and you can see, you know, what we have in common and what are the differences and the importance of that, because then maybe you could empathise and you could understand each other more. And we're not just a one beige Australia. We're a very diverse, distinct Australia with more than 60,000 years of incredible stories for everybody. It's interesting looking back, I guess, I am of the age now but how pivotal is the role of your family, the role of those around us in inspiring you to those next steps? And, you know, I don't take that lightly.

**Shadé** [00:14:06] The true power of real inclusion and opening your eyes to what is really happening around you. And so, Tanya, you touched on the importance of relationships and empathy and also meeting people on an equal level. And I love your view on leadership because it's both powerful and very refreshing. Can you share with us how you reimagine leadership?

**Tanya** [00:14:28] Well, I guess what I've always done is just kept it real. It's about bringing your whole self into the position. And, you know, when I imagined myself moving forward up the corporate ladder, I had a you know, as an 80s kid, as I said, you get the Dallas or the Dynasty sort of ideas of breaking through into the corporate boardroom. And look, that just wasn't me. And, you know, what I did is and I had this feedback is what you see is what you get and you disarm people by ensuring you connect at the personal level. I bring that culture, the culture that I'm a part of as a First Nations woman. It was all about getting to know each other first before you start talking about negotiating this contract or that deal, it's about how do we all connect. So I do that in my rethinking of leadership, I guess if that's the terminology we put on it is about how we connect first as humans. And I think that's very much something I've done through being a Murray kid growing up in central Queensland and seeing the role modeling of my grandparents and my family around me. And I feel that disarms any situation. And you can get to know each other in a way that really helps the process, like you can get through to what you're both trying to achieve in a situation or in a situation where you're having to lead people or you are leading big ideas or big transformation. It's fine to show the vulnerability. And but also it's important to show and explain the vision and the direction and the reasoning. You know, when I think about leadership, I think very much it's a noun, but it's also very much a verb. It's an action. It's a doing. And it doesn't matter where you're at in your career, leadership is something that you can consider any sort of part of what you're doing in your daily life or what you're doing in your work life. It doesn't mean

that if you're the manager, you have to be the leader. It's how you do and how you bring and how you connect with the entire team. So leadership as a doing is also, I guess, a rethinking. It's not this statement of shoulder pads and owning the situation and people have to walk to the beat of your drum. It's a case of we're all in this together and we all have a pivotal role within a scenario. And, you know, we're all leaders in our own way of, you know, what do you want to do to be the best you can with that position? And then how do I respond to it is, I think, something that has been what I've taken forward with me and my leadership journey.

**Shadé** [00:17:25] And I actually really like how you just said that you use your ability to connect as a way to disarm people and your absolute rawness and authenticity, it does disarm. And when you said that, I thought, yes, it's almost like in today's business world, people are armed with armour to protect themselves. They don't want to be vulnerable. They're protecting their interests. But to your point, when you show up and connect on a personal level, put that people orientation first, you're keeping it real. People respond to that and it almost gives them permission to also do the same. And you create this beautiful level playing field where you're connecting with the person first and then you get into business or get onto whatever you need to do, which I think is such a beautiful way to think about it and really embrace this idea of leadership and what it means.

**Tanya** [00:18:14] And it's celebrating your team, nothing is done in isolation and I can't express it enough. It's about how someone feels valued, how I feel valued in the sense of being excited to be, you know, I get to work in an industry of ideas and problem-solving and creation, which is really exciting. But I think this can be taken into any sort of profession where you're coming together, you've got an idea, you've got a passion, and you've got a real worth a part of the system. You're not interchangeable. You're a valued member of the team. And it's really important people walk away at the end of their day in the office or in their virtual world that they're in that they feel that sense of worth that they've provided to what we're trying to achieve. And I think that's something I've tried to really foster within my work environment. So it doesn't matter if I'm doing a big production or we're running some sort of audit and risk committee on how we're managing our internal books. Whatever it is, it requires people feeling that they're a part of something and they go to work and you respect what they bring to the table.

**Shadé** [00:19:32] And when it comes to leadership, we know that qualities and traits like empathy, collaboration and intuition are extremely important for communication and for decision-making. Do you see that as women, we have an advantage as leaders because of the traits that we intuitively bring? And what do you feel are non-negotiables when it comes to leading a team?

**Tanya** [00:19:52] Well, as a woman, yes, I think we are leading in so many ways. Look, I think we've got some inherent you know, and look, I say this when men bring their feminine side to work as much as, you know, whether it's not so gender specific, but it's what we deliver as who we are to bring that feminine quality. And what's that feminine quality, I believe, is that empathy, really understanding what it's like to walk in somebody's shoes and caring, you know, I think years ago, especially in the world I was growing up in as a journalist, you had to be tough and you had to question everything. And, you know, showing a degree of vulnerability and sensitivity wasn't really what you did in the newsroom, let alone in the executive of a broadcasting room. So it's, you know, I believe women, from my experiences and whom I've worked with, have brought beautiful understanding and insight into human

behaviour. I think sometimes we have tried to be something that unnecessarily depending on the scenario but we can just I guess it's just be yourself, whether it's a female or a male or whoever you are, I think that quality is all about bringing your whole self to work and empathising with each other. We all have lived experiences. We may not know what people are going through. And I think it's really important to sort of, you know, really have deep breaths when you're busy and frustrated and need to get the job done. But it's important to always take that step back and have that time, as I say, on the floor, but also out of the above and having a look at the whole picture. And I guess when you ask about what are the non-negotiables, when I first went into my leadership journey of managing people, I was told about the formula of Cs and I joke with my team about that because we come up with all sorts of words with starting with the letter C. And what really sticks to me, though, as a non-negotiable for any manager, any leader is clarity. You need to ensure that you're really clear with your team or with individuals of what you're expecting of them. People need to know; what's expected? What's their job? What are we trying to achieve? Clarity, every day is important. Clarity in the big projects, the reasoning of why is really important. It's also for me a non-negotiable is in your role as a manager and your role as a leader in an organisation is setting the climate, ensuring that whatever is happening in someone's life outside of that, you know, what you create is a different climate internally in the sense of if someone is, you know, behaviour is toxic or there's issues that are underperforming, how do we work with that? Because it could just be one person within your entire team, as they say, can really impact every element, whether it's performance or output to people's feeling of valuing what they bring to the job. And look, I think with that, there are two other Cs that I'd like to talk about and that's competence. You want to make sure you're providing professional development and you're growing your people that they're that not only delivering to your organisation or what you're trying to achieve but people have a sense of worth that they're growing as humans on the planet in the sense that they're giving to you as an organisation and as a leader. You want to keep growing with them because the more you provide them in professional development, the more they give back. But also you need to make sure you're hiring the right people for your job so that competence of someone could be really great at one aspect. But if they become a manager, for instance, not really their thing, like how do you work with them? So they feel that they've got the skills in order to do their job. And the other thing, you know, just that confidence, you've got to own your place in the world. You know, I think we can always have that, I know for me, I feel, you know, you hear this a lot, especially with women, is imposter syndrome. What are you doing here? You know, I do suffer. I am just a little girl from central Queensland. What am I doing down in the big smoke and running and being an executive of a broadcaster and leading massive decisions when it comes to media, media policy and content production, doing deals with other broadcasters. And I think what you know; I'm just a girl from the bush. I'm Guugu Yimidjirr and Birri and I grew up in the small little town. And what am I doing here? So I do have a laugh about it. I got to shake it out and it's like I worked hard for this place. I know what I deliver and I've got to own that confidence. And I think sometimes maybe as women, maybe as Australians, we like to downplay that. But I think our time really is now to really own what we contribute to the shift that's happening. So for my industry in the media landscape, the role women are playing in that but the role we're playing in politics, the role playing in corporate Australia, I think, like I said, with Indigenous media, there's a lot more that we need to do. But we've come a long way and having that confidence is a non-negotiable when you embark on your leadership journey.

**Shadé** [00:25:42] Gosh, I couldn't agree more. And I love how you even shared that you experienced imposter syndrome. It is something that we all face. You said the little girl from central Queensland who was keeping it real

and making some serious waves. This is what you're doing. And I think there are so many powerful messages that came through in what you were sharing around the importance of bringing empathy to work, bringing your whole self to work, but also this idea of positively influencing and knowing that as a leader, when you bring your whole self to work, you know, there's this incredible concept in psychology called emotional contagion, where people can literally catch the emotions and the moods of others. And it's because of what's going on in the brain and mirror neurons. But when you show up with optimism and enthusiasm and again, that authenticity, people see that and subconsciously take that on and again, giving them permission to do the same. And this is how you have that dial shift when it comes to climate and when it comes to encouraging people to own their confidence. So when so many amazing messages that have come through. So now, Tanya, as you know, at Leading Women, we're committed to activating women's leadership. And our unique impact is that each of our amazing guests offers an actionable tool that's ignited their leadership for us to add into our leadership toolbox to elevate equality and redefine our business landscape. So what are you adding for us today?

**Tanya** [00:27:06] I think if there's something I'd like to impart on is the bigger picture, you know, it's not just about where we are at today with our careers. It's about, you know, I guess what the legacy is or what we're leaving into the world and how we want to make it a better place and consider how every decision we make and the impact that can have on other generations to come. In my culture, time is never ending. There's continuity. You know, my son, his children and my grandparents. And, you know, he is already a grandparent to my parents. How we look after each other is really important. And, you know, in what you do in a workplace, if there's something you know, it's not a book, it's not, it's more the knowledge I've had growing up in as a Guugu Yimidhirr and a Birri Gubba woman as a Murray kid in in central Queensland is the importance of, you know, respect of people, no matter their walk of life and how you can bring in into your workplace, reach out of connecting with another human in the sense of getting to know them and, you know, connect with each other first on a heart and a soul level and get to know what motivates them or, you know, what is their joy. And when you get to know those people around you, you can act and be that person they need you to be and be that leader. And when you're thinking about the decisions you're making and, you know, it's not just necessarily the bottom line, it's about, okay, what is the best I can be and be how people are seeing me and that sort of impact that you have. If you go back to the fact that this woman reading the news was enough for me to trigger and change my whole career, you know, always keep mindful you're being watched and people are connecting and they're seeing out how humans need each other and they also need each other, they care for each other and connect with each other. And I guess of the year of COVID of a year of a massive transition where we've not since the Industrial Revolution has it been such a shift in the way we work and way we connect has relationship been more important? And if there's a long way of saying something quite simple in my answer is, you know, in your leadership journey just be yourself, connect and think about the imprint or the footprint you're going to leave for others.

**Shadé** [00:29:56] What a beautifully empowering message to leave us all with, Tanya, thank you so much for your insight, for your stories. I really feel like you brought your heart and soul to this conversation that we had. I love the piece that you shared that was inspired by your Indigenous culture around the fact that we need to think it's not just about where we are now. It's about the legacy that we want to leave and how we want to make this world a better

place. And as women, we need to own our place in the world. And this is how we can change our personal narrative and the footprint that we leave behind. It's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you so much.

**Tanya** [00:30:30] Thank you.

**Shadé** [00:30:36] What a rich conversation of blending culture with leadership, with the ultimate aim of creating a legacy for generations to come, and that's all for this conversation. We're looking forward to you joining us next episode. So until then, share this episode with the women leaders, you know, and let's activate leadership together.

**Jinny** [00:30:56] 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)