

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



Episode 37

Published: 23 September 2016

Host: Annemarie Cross

Annemarie Cross: You're listening to Women in Leadership podcast episode 37. Hi, you're listening to Women in Leadership podcast – the podcast that empowers you to reach your full potential. I'm your host Annemarie Cross branding communication strategist also known as the podcasting queen.

As a leader, do you find it difficult to set and achieve goals? Perhaps you're constantly confronted with challenges or maybe you feel self conscious because you just don't have all of the answers or you fill in the gap. Well on today's show I'm joined my Isabel Boniface.

Isabel currently holds a leadership role in Microsoft and previous has owned and sold her business. She is a mother to two very busy teenagers, Dylan and Samantha, and wife to Gary. She was born in South Africa and has been living in Australia for the last eight years.

Isabel thrives on challenging herself both in business and in personal life and she enjoys the thrill of solving problems that appear unsolvable. She's known as someone who lives for results, and most recently a colleague commented that in a dictionary tenacity has a picture of her next to it.

On today's show Isabel is going to share the value of being surrounded by the right people, why it's important to find opportunity in the chaos, and why

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



vulnerability is not a weakness and much much more. Welcome to the show Isabel.

Isabel: Thanks for having me.

Annemarie: Some of the things that you have done previously that you're really proud of is starting, running, and selling your own business. Tell us a bit more about that.

Isabel: I never set out to really start my own business. I have a tendency to think that I can solve world hunger and that's exactly how I ended up starting my own business. I came across a problem within the corporate environment where I was working.

In coming across that problem I actually realized that it was a problem that I thought I could solve by starting my own business, which is what I did with a colleague at the time. We resigned, started our own businesses, and we're actually very very successful at it.

But we started with the principle that we would only do it while we were having fun. After three years I stop having fun. Sold it.

Annemarie: Fantastic. So that was a startup business that you'd grown and then at the end of three years you've decided to move on. Fantastic. That was in South Africa.

Isabel: Yes.

Annemarie: And then you said you immigrated to Australia.

Isabel: That's right. We've been living here nine years.

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



Annemarie: How long have been with Microsoft?

Isabel: I actually worked for Microsoft in South Africa as well prior to starting my own business, and I've been back in the Australian subsidiary for the last six years. Absolutely loving it.

Annemarie: Yeah. Something that you and the team Microsoft are really proud of is that you've just recently won the Australian Business Award for marketing excellence. Congratulations.

Isabel: Yeah. Absolutely. Thank you. Yes.

Annemarie: Tell us about that. What was some of the initiatives that the team did that secured that award.

Isabel: I've actually been in my current role for three years. I joined as the S&B marketing lead and really wanted to make a difference as to how we were approaching small businesses. I thought we could have a conversation in a different tone of voice. We went on this path of permission marketing to really speak to small businesses when they wanted to be spoken to.

Right in the beginning when I started that journey, my manager at the time said to me it's one thing to be recognized within Microsoft and winning awards within Microsoft, but it's a completely different thing to be recognized by your peers in the industry. And that became my goal.

So for us to be recognized in the industry as an organization that's really made a difference in how we communicate with small businesses is something that we're incredibly proud of.

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



Annemarie: I love the way that you said that you had a goal and you worked towards that and you achieved that. Many women whether they're in business or they are incorporate, they do have a goal but there's something that holds them back whether it's own inner critic or they just don't think that they can achieve that and they don't really reach out to goals. Even studies have been done that that can happen quite consistently too.

What do you think it is? Is it an attitude or is it something about your approach that you look at something in a way that say you know what I am going to achieve that with the team. What is it that sets you up to have a goal and then go after that?

[0:04:57]

Isabel: I think there a couple of things. I always verbalized my goal. So it's a not a goal that set for myself in private. I always go to the team and be that my team at home so my husband and my family and cited in hey I have a goal and it might I want to lose weight or I want to get fit or I want us to save for a family holiday.

I verbalized it with other people because that holds me through higher account. But also I do have an enormous determination to achieve what I set out to achieve. I believe that I owed it to myself, that I deserve it. Not because I'm a woman but because I'm good enough.

Annemarie: I love that. I love that. It's such a great role model for women. Now you mentioned too that through the journey there may be some decisions that you've made or some actions that you and your team have implemented and you didn't quite reach the level of expectations. What do you do then?

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



The reason I ask that is sometimes men and women particularly we may work towards our goals, set little milestones along the way and unfortunately when we reach a challenge we take ourselves out of the running. What do you do? What do you tell yourself and what do you as a team?

Isabel:

During the last three years we made plenty mistakes. I held myself to account and say we owned up to those mistakes. We tested a lot of things that didn't come to fruition because we were going through such a different approach. We went 100% digital so none of the traditional marketing things and activities that used to be the way that you reach small businesses were actually kept in place.

There was a lot of stuff we didn't know and we had to test fast, learn fast and then fail fast. And that fail fast is not a part that you can actually skim over. You need to be able to be okay with failing. When you do to actually say we tried it. We failed. We failed for a reason and this is what we've learned out of it, and now we moved forward, and we're going to test the next thing and the next thing and the next thing.

Regardless if you're a man or a woman you need to be okay with failing. Failing is just part of the process. It's not something to be ashamed of. You shouldn't take yourself out of the running for failing. You should be proud of failing. Next week I'm one of the presenters at the Australian Partner Conference. In that section, I'm going to be talking about our failures.

Annemarie:

Cause you learn from failures and it means you're taking action and you're doing something.

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



Isabel: It's important as a leader to step and say you know what. We don't get it right every time. Because it shows the other people in the room that our leaders get it wrong. We get it wrong all the time.

Annemarie: I love that and in fact just recently in a podcast interview that I did we were talking about as a leader what can we do to make sure that we create an environment that people, our team want to be there. They respect you.

And that is one of the qualities that was mentioned that we discussed was a leader who is able to step back and have that conversation that says, you know what. It didn't turn out as we expect it. How can we move forward? What's the best approach?

I think that humility and that ability to have that conversation rather than putting the blame on others.

Isabel: Yeah.

Annemarie: Unfortunately some leaders do do that doesn't create for a harmonious collaborative team approach, does it?

Isabel: No. It doesn't.

Annemarie: One of the things that you enjoy doing too and this is more personal level was learning to ride a motorbike. Looking back at the strategies that you used I'd imagine that that's the kind of steel strategy that you use on a personal level. You have a goal. You know that you deserve it. You're worth it and you just go and do it.

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



Isabel:

Well learning to ride a motorbike is probably one of those left field things when my husband set up and went you went you want to do what? It's something that he enjoys and I thought it was important for me to take on a challenge that would allow us to connect better as a couple.

It was just as I was turning 40 and I thought what better time for me to actually learn a new skill. It was probably the most daunting thing I've ever had to do because it really took me back to where you typically are when you're 16. Learning to drive. Learning to ride a motorbike.

I had to go to riding school with 16-year-olds who had better balance and the intuition than what I had. But you know what. What I learned out of that is that you're never too old to learn. You're never too old to learn a new skill.

[0:10:00]

It's always good to put yourself in those positions where you're not the most senior person in the room that's got all of the skills. It had also really made me vulnerable. It made me vulnerable with my husband who's a very experienced rider. He's been riding half his life. He really had to support me to get through this.

It's always a little bit daunting to be married to a very strong career woman. For me to be that vulnerable and falling over and crying about the fact that I was struggling and that I didn't know how I was going to get through this, and he really steps up and he was supporting me. That was an amazing amazing thing for us to go through as a couple.

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



But also it was a great exercise for me to go through. I did get my license. I did ride a motorbike for two years. I just recently decided this is not necessarily something that I'm going to do until I'm 60. I will always have the motorbike license and it's always something that we can do as a couple.

Annemarie: It's incredible that when you look at anything that you're doing in life whether it'd be business, career or personal when you're learning things it stretches you. It shares insights about you that I'm sure that you use within your day to day team leadership and things like that as well.

Isabel: Yeah. It does teach you that sometimes you do need to just step back and you don't always have to be the person that takes the lead and be charge and know the most. Sometimes it's okay to say I just don't know.

Annemarie: Yeah. That leads us to really great point that you can bring some insights and wisdom around and that has been surrounded by the right people. I think as a leader sometimes we assumed that we need to know everything.

Yet what you're saying is you don't and if you surround yourself with the right people, valuable people who bring different skill set that can just uplift and support the entire team. So share a little bit more about that.

Isabel: When I started my own business, I was a young mom. I have two kids who are now actually teenagers. My daughter was one-year-old when I started my business and I had my son while I had my business and my partner at the time also just had a baby.

Today, it's more acceptable to have flexible working environments in business. But those days it was quite unheard of. When we started our business we actually

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



decided that we wanted to create a business with the right people regardless of the person's circumstances. So we created a very unique business.

We actually reached out to women who didn't want to work full time because of personal circumstances and that was for a variety of reason. Sometimes it was children but sometimes it was distance from living from where we had offices. But we recruited the right people both from cultural faith and also from the skills and what they can contribute to the business and it became a culture in its own right.

We ended up with more than just women but also men that made that choice that they would sacrifice what we could potentially not pay in terms salary but because we gave that flexibility and understanding with an organization.

I've taken that forward in my career and also in the way that I choose my team is to say the people that surround me are vitally important and respecting the way that they want to work and the way they approach their work.

Annemarie: I think that's so important to remember as leaders is that when we are really clear and we set an intention and that intention also includes the values and the needs, the desires of our team that is similar that's aligned with us as a corporation, as a business then that means that the people that you attract are going to feel fulfilled. That there is meaning in their work because it aligns with them and everybody is working together towards a common goal. Yeah.

Isabel: Yeah.

Annemarie: Fantastic. One of the other things that you say is to find opportunity in chaos which is really interesting because for many people we try and turn the other way

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



and run away from chaos. Yet here you are saying find opportunities, the golden nuggets. Share more about that.

Isabel: My husband has a saying that says Isabel if there is no chaos, you will create it. I just believe for not only for where I work. Obviously, I work in a corporation. I don't have my own business but even for entrepreneurs out there but also for small business owners, there is opportunity in the chaos.

If you think about every great business idea and even for me where I work is if I look around me and look at where is the chaos point within the organization that's where I can focus my attention and know that I can have a real impact.

[0:15:05]

If I can bring order to the chaos, that's where the biggest impact is going to be. If you're a small business and you're looking around you and you go where is the chaos in my environment, if you can come up with the solution to solve the chaos then you're going to have the biggest impact.

Annemarie: Sometimes in small businesses if we're honest with ourselves, us as the leader can sometimes be the chaos or causing chaos because some leaders may not necessarily be communicating well with their team.

But it's interesting. When you're brave enough and courageous enough to have a look at that challenge and that chaos the incredible insights because you change things. What you don't monitor, you cannot change and improve. So those are certainly great lessons.

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



Is there a particular incident or a time that you can think back on that you did really find an incredible opportunity in a challenge, maybe a recent challenge that's come up?

Isabel:

We were this chaos all around us and obviously with technology we were able to solve a lot of the chaos. That's what make it so exciting for us to work in a place like Microsoft. We can look around us and look around us and look at where businesses are struggling to connect better with customers or they struggle to connect with their own employees and we can bring order to that chaos.

In small businesses especially I look at so many small businesses that's running on such old technology and that's where I really want to focus my attention is how the opportunity for us to bring order to that. You know, let's talk about the vulnerability in your business not just from a security perspective but also around are you enabling yourself really to work the way that they want to work or are you really helping them to bring their best to work every single day and what does that mean for you.

Annemarie:

Yeah. That is key because when you think of the work environment if your technology is not working effectively you can correct chaos for you team, lost of productivity. But also I think too if something is not streamlined and functioning as well as what the team would like that really deflates their whole approach, doesn't it.

Even too if we talk about the business and creating an experience for our customers, if we're not willing to track and monitor to see what are some

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



bottlenecks. What's the challenges? What's the chaos and can we create an experience that is streamline and that customers want to continue to come back and work with our businesses. Then if we're not willing to do that, we're really limiting ourselves out as businesses, as corporate, as leaders.

Isabel:

Yeah. Absolutely. Probably about two years ago or eighteen months ago we did an exercise with the small business locals, small business here in Sydney when we did a makeover. So we went out to find a small business that really were struggling with technology. We found the small business that was really just on ten-year-old servers and desktop. We went in to speak to them in a small only ten staff members.

But when we went in we found staff that was really at the end of their rope. They were crying about what was happening at home. The owner of the business did not realize really the impact that technology was having on his staff. How they were working in the middle of the night because they can't get access to their service during day time or finance manager that's having to work off hours.

She had to buy a car because she's too scared to take public transport. It just had this ripple effect. We really wanted to dig in what's happening with his staff. It was just horrendous. We implemented a whole new solution for this business. It took us probably four months to make all of this happened and then we interviewed them at the end of it.

Not only did we see that the staff were happier but we saw that they were different. There was this lift of being more self confident. They carry themselves differently. I actually wrote a blog after that to say that technology is like Jimmy Choo shoes for staff members because it's like wearing a pair of great high heels.

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



All of a sudden, you carry yourself to meeting. You have confidence. It's really worth thinking about the impact that technology can have on your staff.

Annemarie: I think it can impact in such positive ways in every aspect of the business. A number of my colleagues are involved in the tech. They're more the repair people.

[0:20:00]

They said if your computer takes five minutes longer to start up and you times through how many times you start your computer through the day, through the week, through the month, through the year, if you add that up that's just one staff member. Times that by ten or how many staff, it's costing you not just productivity but all of that. So it definitely is worthwhile looking at all of those opportunities in the chaos.

One other thing, last thing I'd love to discuss is vulnerability is not a weakness. This is something that's often debated because typically with thought that vulnerability as a leader we don't want to be seen as vulnerable. But you say in actual fact that's not a weakness. So share a little bit more about that.

Isabel: This is a lesson that I have to learn. I grew up with two brothers. I was the only daughter and the youngest to make it even worst. But I grew up in a very small town with only three schools. I ended up going to a school for boys which is probably a very surprising fact because I'm actually a girl. But we were 28 girls in a school for boys.

So I grew up in a very male dominant environment where vulnerability was frowned upon. Boys just didn't tolerate it. They didn't tolerate girls crying. They

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



didn't tolerate gossiping or any of those things. So I really grew up for a very long time just conversing with men and learning to act and react in a very kind of my way.

Entering into the workplace I brought all of that with me. It was an adjustment for me to understand that I didn't have to be as tough as nails. That it was okay for me to be vulnerable and to show that I'm human, that there's a lot going on in my life.

That yes I can be a very very effective leader within the business and be very effective in the work that I do and to keep all of the goals but still have a tough day and not lose the respect of the my colleagues for having a tough day and admit when I make mistakes.

When I do, I actually got the respect of my colleagues but I also got the empathy of my colleagues. That's an important component. We're not robots.

Annemarie:

No. You know I have spoken to many women who have been in environments unfortunate environments very much what you described when you went to school. As women particularly we do like those relationships where we can share something and not have to lock things away and constantly be operating at accelerated level.

Even that's unhealthy for men. We'll often get to the point we will crash out if we don't take a step back and allow ourselves to create the space where can show empathy, have empathy, return to us and have that vulnerability.

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



Isabel: It's not healthy. Not many people know this but when I was running my small business – so this is a number of years. I've lived in this country for almost nine years. So I started my small business in 2002 and I sold it in 2006.

A year before I sold it, my dad committed suicide. Through all the time that happened, I never shed tears. My dad died. My son was born three weeks later my dad died. All that time I never let anybody in and two weeks later I was back at work.

I just marched on and everybody said to me are you okay. Of course, I'm okay. Let's move on people. There's work to be done, salaries to be paid. Let's get on with it. A year later, I completely collapsed. Everything in my body was depleted.

Everything was depleted. There was just nothing there. Adrenalin, cortisone, everything was completely depleted. That's why I say we're not robots.

Annemarie: No. It's important.

Isabel: Sometimes bad things happened and we spend so much time working and in the relationships that we have with our colleagues, it's important to let them in and sometimes say you know what, I'm hurting. Bad things happened and I'm hurting.

Annemarie: Thank you for sharing that example. For someone who may be listening today who finds herself in exactly that same situation I think as a leader through modeling that you create an environment in which your team feels safe and feels validated.

[0:25:00]

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



That if they are having an issue or something that's happening that's really impacting them that they feel confident enough to approach you or their team other team members and to be able to say something and not bottle that way because ultimately you don't want your team getting like that either. So modeling that as a leader leading by example is...

Isabel:

Yeah. Going through it I think there was a lot of my staff at the time and my customers at the time that had this reluctant admiration for whatever story and thinking what an amazing strong women. No. I wasn't amazing strong. What I was doing was saying to my staff that I can get through this and not take a day off then you should be able to do that. That's not the message you want to send.

What I was doing was I was cruel to my family. I was cruel to my newborn baby. I was cruel to my mom who was going through horrible time. I was cruel to myself and eventually I paid the price on every single level and across all of those relationships and I was so cruel to my staff to set that example.

So you think you're brave. You're not brave. That's not a good leadership to do that. These days I'm a lot kinder I think to everyone around me especially to myself.

Annemarie:

Yeah. In the lesson that you learn, I mean what a tragedy to have to experience. As you're sharing that story, I can really see that you bring so many more insights and wisdom to how you know operating and we see as a leader and I think the examples that we set and how we lead by example can impact positively and incredibly well or on the opposite effect too. So bringing that to your team I'm

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



sure it enables them to lead by example because everyone is a leader in some form of organization, isn't it?

Isabel: Absolutely.

Annemarie: You've shared so many great insights. Is there any last advice or principles or wisdom that you want to share before we close the show?

Isabel: One of the things that you asked me before we spoke about how do I feel about women in business? This is something that I get asked about all the time and I get asked to these forums about women in business and discussion groups about women in business. I've shared with you that I didn't grow up in much female lead environment.

You know I sit in these forums and I listen to women talking about their experiences. My advice to women is ban the words "it's because I'm a woman" out of your vocabulary. It's not because you're a woman. Don't assume it is because you are a woman. Because you will rob yourself of so many opportunities to learn if your assumption is "it's because I'm a woman."

Nine times out of ten, it's not. I am yet in my career to experience a job that I didn't get, an opportunity I didn't get, a behavior that was displayed because I was a woman. However, I have plenty of examples where I didn't get a role, didn't get an opportunity because of plenty of other reasons that had nothing to do with the fact that I was a woman.

I think there is a focus on behaviors around women in business. I'm not disagreeing that there are elements of that. But I do think we need to be a little bit careful to not over rotate on it especially as we had young people coming into

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



the workplace and then jumping to conclusions that everything that happens to me is because I'm a woman. No. It's not, honey.

Annemarie: No. You need to change that frame of mind, don't you? Didn't get the role. Okay. Maybe I need to do some more training. Maybe I need to practice my interview skills or whatever it might be.

Isabel: Be curious and ask your question. Go and ask why did that happen? Go and ask about why. Be very curious about it and be willing to hear the reasons. But in my experience and this is 25 years in working in corporate very often it's got nothing to do with the fact that you're a woman.

Annemarie: That's right. Thank you so much for sharing your insights today, Isabel. It really has been a pleasure and honor.

Isabel: Thank you very much for asking me.

[0:30:02]

Annemarie: What I've done over the last few shows I'm inviting one of my fellow Microsoft brand ambassadors to share a tech tip. How we can use technology whether it'd be Microsoft Surface and app or even a process in order to help us streamline our business cause we're always looking at optimizing our efficiency.

Now if you are a Microsoft Surface Pro user or you've got a favorite app that you are using in a way that really has streamlined your business, let me know. We will do a shout out on the show to say thank you. Just send an email to podcast@annemariex.com. Let's dive into today's tech tip.

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



Today we welcome back Megan Iemma Tech Coach HQ. Welcome Megan. What tip do you have for us today?

Megan:

I'm looking at a tool that Microsoft has developed called PowerBI. It's powerbi.com. What it is the visualization tool for your data and the reason I like this. I show this when I was at the Microsoft office last week is that being a business owner I sometimes struggle with figures and numbers.

But when it's pretty graphs and data visualization, in images, I understand my data so much better. We just did a really basic setup. You just need to have a Microsoft account. You can actually connect your Google Analytics and that's what we did. It's so good to be able to see what my data looks like in this form because I can see page views and things like that. Yes. I can see going into the Google analytics but I also can connect to other services which is a really cool thing.

For example, if you're a Zero client you can connect – they're called service pack and you add those in. For example, you might have Google Analytics. Some of the other examples for small business owners might be MailChimp, that they've got listed. Some of the other bigger Microsoft products, Microsoft project online things like 365.

So there's actually quite a few but I just like that you can bring all those data visualizations into place. Cause the reality is if we can check the health of our business really easily and understand it, we're going to be able to work more on the business than in the business.

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



Annemarie: Just like it's so important to track our financial figures as you said it's really important to check our analytics. Where is that traffic coming from? What's working really well? Let's continue to do that. What's not working really well? What can we change to maybe boost it or maybe it's something that we put on the side. We don't know those things. We can't take action and decide on strategies unless we're monitoring. So this sounds like a really great tool. Can you share that link again with everyone?

Megan: Powerbi.com.

Annemarie: Fantastic. We know that you love things all tech. If someone is having an issue or problem, how can they reach out to you?

Megan: They can go to my website at www.techcoachhq.com.au. They can also find me @megsamanda on Twitter or meganaiemma on Instagram. I have a great Facebook group called Tech Made Simply which they are more to join. It's technology to help small to medium size business startups and entrepreneurs.

Annemarie: Fantastic. Thanks again, Megan.

Megan: Thank you for having me.

Annemarie: Are you attending numerous networking events but is struggling to get results that you want? Go ahead and grab my free Network with Confidence checklist. How to network and communicate with confidence so you can grow your network, your relationships, your business, and your career.

There's lots of different tips and strategies within that checklist. Suggested ice breakers so that you can start a meaningful conversation even with people you

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



have no meet before. How to create a powerful introduction that entices people to want to know more about you and your business.

Also how to respond to this difficult question “so tell me more about your business?” so you can answer it confidently and continue to create interest in your work and so much more. How you grab that list, just go to the link www.annemariemcross.com/networkwithconfidencechecklist. So you can start networking with confidence.

That brings us to end of another episode I do hope you will join me again next week. Remember if you haven’t already go and subscribe to our iTunes channel. The link is annemariemcross.com/podcastitunes. By subscribing to our channel this means that you’re going to be the very first person who learns about each new episode that we release so that you can continue to be inspired and empowered each and every week just like you were today I’m sure through listening to Isabel.

That link again is annemariemcross.com/podcastitunes. While you’re over there, we would love it if you would leave a comment and a rating as well that allows us to get our message out into the ears of as many other women who are up to great stuff. So see you again next week. Have a fabulous week everyone. Bye for now.

[0:35:50]

End of Audio