



Equality Talks Podcast - Transcript

Episode 5: Board Careers and Supporting Women with Diane Smith-Gander

Equality Talks. Brought to you by Work 180. Where we discuss how to finally put an end to workplace discrimination. Let's talk about what it really takes to succeed, what people are doing to drive equality and what can still be done.

Samantha Sutherland:

Today's guest is Diane Smith-Gander. She's a professional non-executive director maintaining a really diverse portfolio. She's an advocate for gender equality and a past president of Chief Executive Women. She also holds an Order of Australia.

Diane is the national chairman for CEDA, the Centre for Economic Development of Australia, a director of AGL Energy, West Farmer's Limited, and QA Group of Companies, Keystart Loans, HBF Health Limited, and the chair of Safe Work Australia.

Diane has been active in sports administration and is a past chairman of both Basketball Australia Limited and the Australian Sports Drug Agency. She's also chair of the inaugural nominations committee for the world anti-doping agency. Diane holds an MBA from the University of Sydney and a bachelor of economics from the University of Western Australia, who awarded her an honorary doctorate of economics. She's a fellow of the AICD and Governance Institute of Australia and an adjunct professor of corporate governance at UWA where she chairs the advisory board of the business school.

With a hugely impressive CV, I'm so excited to be talking to you today. Thank you so much for joining me, Diana.

Diane Smith-Gander:

Sam, I'm really delighted to be here.

Samantha Sutherland:

You wear many hats, as we just heard when I was reading out your bio and each one on their own is incredibly impressive. Can you talk a bit about how you balance all the pressures in your life and all the different things that you're doing and where you choose how to direct your attention?

Diane Smith-Gander:

That's a really great question because it's changing a lot while we're in this new coronavirus world. I think at the end of the day, though, a lot of the work that I do starts with thinking about am I happy with the values of this organization? Will I be able to develop some passion for it? When you're balancing a lot of things that have some sort of common thread through it, it can be really difficult to move from one activity to the next.

For example, with the pro bono things that I do, I chair the Committee for the Economic Development of Australia, CEDA, as you said. I'm the chair of the WA Business School advisory board. I'm also the deputy chair of Methodist Ladies College Council. You can see there's a very strong education spike there and so what I'm trying to do is to get an understanding all the way through from the pre-kindy to year 12 that Methodist Ladies College does in Perth, through the business school and then into how people use their business training and economics understanding through CEDA. Part of it is about making sure there is that common thread.

Samantha Sutherland:

Because you do have such a diverse set of things that you're on boards for and you have the common threads with some of them but then also there seems to be just an element of being a director, which is part of it. Do you find that you want to have a common thread with the things that you have directorships with?

Diane Smith-Gander:

That's a great question because when I started to build my portfolio, a lot of people said to me, "Look, you've got this wonderful first directorship as you're building your portfolio of Wesfarmers." It's a really highly regarded board. People aspire to be on that and here you are, starting out, and that's the first directorship.

Now I had had some experience previously during my executive career. I'd been on some government boards and so forth and, obviously, internal boards of the subsidiaries of Wesfarmers.

Here was this Wesfarmers as the big anchor. People said to me, "You'll get two or three other listed companies and that'll be it." I thought, "Oh, that's an interesting thought process." I hadn't spent a huge amount of time really thinking through the pros and cons of all of that.

I wanted to do an excellent job in my first term at Wesfarmers and so my thought process was, "Okay, I'll bed this in a bit, see how I make the transition" - all of the things that you do when you're pivoting your career.

Of course, the phone started ringing immediately because people would say, "Who is this new person?" I'd been away for eight years in the United States. I'd been back in Australia less than 12 months. People really didn't know me that well. I thought, "Well, why are they offering me these directorships if they don't know me?" Wesfarmers had some very specific reasons, they'd gone through a very structured selection process and I could see exactly where I fitted in, the diversity I would bring, and the contribution that I would make.

Here we are with all these other phone calls and then the penny dropped, of course, "Oh, it's just because I'm new. I'm sort of fresh meat. People haven't seen me before. I'm not on a lot of other boards. They think they'll get in quick, if the person is on Wesfarmers, it must be great." All of that type of thing. I thought, "Well, that's not really what I had in mind."

What I then started to do was think about I'd had a great experience with the Australia Sports Drug Agency and Commonwealth Government Agency as the chair of the audit committee and then as the chair of the board. I thought, "I'd like to do some government work as well. I don't just have to be in listed companies."

Then someone said to me, "What about CBH? Corporative Bulk Handling? They're the biggest co-operative in Australia and they're really important in WA and they run all the storage and handling assets for the grain growers." I thought, "Actually what I want to do is to build a completely diverse portfolio when it comes to the type of organization."

Now I aspire to have one or two large listed companies as the anchor of my portfolio and then to have one state government enterprise, one Commonwealth government thing, a couple of pro bono's and something a bit different and that's exactly what's in my portfolio now. It does make me busy but because you bring them on over time, you're bedded down and you're in rhythm on through your four things and then the next one that comes along, you've got to spend a bit of time getting inducted and learning about that and understanding the rhythm but it's been very helpful, for me, in terms of continuing to develop me as a director, as a business person, to understand all the different issues that come with these different forms of enterprise.

I see some private equity, I see some member-based organizations and as a result, I've just joined the board of HBF Health Limited, now it's a financial service institution based in western Australia but it's a member-based organization. I understood member-based organizations because of CBH. They could see that I was a very relevant person to invite onto that board.

Samantha Sutherland:

Yeah. That's really interesting because you were in a position where you were getting a lot of calls but actually decided to be really deliberate about the opportunities that you pursued and accepted rather than just taking the things that got offered to you when you got the initial Wesfarmers appointment.

Diane Smith-Gander:

That's right. But, you know, the thing is one of the most important things and people say to me, "How did you get on this board or that board?" I say, "Well, actually, the most important thing is that they ask you." That's the tricky thing. People don't understand how that process works and the right way to put themselves forward. It isn't about running a super structured process and making a target list. You need to do that to a degree.

You do need to understand where you would be relevant and where you're not so that you don't run down dead ends where you eventually find, "I don't bring any diversity to this board" or, "I'm not going to actually be able to make a contribution" but you need to be seen as someone who is open to lots of different opportunities and not typecast yourself. I think that's one of the reasons that I continue to get a lot of interest in how my portfolio is developing. I'll have Chairs ring me and say, "When will there be a gap in your portfolio? How are you thinking about that?"

Of course, one of the delightful things that does for me is it means that I can go into this big fat folder I've got in my email, which is called Other People's CVs. I can say, "Look, I don't think I'm the right person but do you know of?" Then I pop out three or four names and I do have to be honest and say that for every 10 names I pop out of that process, nine of them will be female names.

Samantha Sutherland:

Right. Well, that's really interesting because I wanted to ask you about, without knowing that specific story, which I love, in one of the articles I read about you when I was doing some research, it was when you took on the Chief Executive Women presidency. You said in that article that I read, "Every woman should be helping other women. I think there's a special place in hell for a woman who climbs the ladder and pulls it up behind her." That's a sort of corporate twist on Madeleine Albright's quote, which is, "There's a special place in hell for women who don't help other women."

I was going to ask you how you do that in your life and you've given such a perfect example. Can you talk about why this is so important for you? Why this means so much to you?

Diane Smith-Gander:

Well, it means so much to me for a start off, because I'm actually a woman and I do think that we have been discriminated against for a very long time and we haven't had a level playing field.

I want that to be different. I want Australia and western Australia to be able to access all of the talent that's available to it. I want organizations to be really efficient and effective and it's not efficient or effective to have great women join you and then throw away all that investment in their passion for your company, the training and development, the history they have with the organization just because you can't be smart enough to find the way to have flexible working.

One of the few silver linings, of course, in the coronavirus cloud is the fact that people's understanding of the skill profile of flexible work has fundamentally changed and it can never go back to what it was before. We now all know that flexible working is not anywhere near as scary or as threatening of the company's performance as we maybe thought it might be.

What's very important now is that we don't just go, "Oh, flexible working, box ticked" and just think we're going to march forward without being very thoughtful about pulling into place some really good policies about working from home and flexible working, which are indeed two different things.

I'm super passionate about trying to make sure that people don't have to feel in the future that they're discriminated against and that they do have a level playing field.

Samantha Sutherland:

Do you have an example that you can share from your own career of when another woman really helped lift you up and give you opportunities or helped support you?

Diane Smith-Gander:

When I came back to Australia from the US, I was really fortunate that Helen Lynch, who I had known when I worked at Westpac was prepared to step into the role of chairman of Diane's board of mentors. She gave me some absolutely fantastic advice. She's a super human being.

She had been chair of OPSM, she had been on the Westpac board, she had been on the Coles Myer board. She had all of this experience that I didn't have and that's the definition of a mentor, someone who has done a bunch of stuff that you think you're going to have to do or you really want to do and so they can extend your understanding of that and extend your situational reach. That's a mentor.

She was the perfect mentor for me and she was up for the challenge. She said, "I will be the chairman of the board of mentors but you have to actually recruit the rest of them because that will help me understand whether you're really getting what you're stepping into."

I had to go around and find the other people who were going to be my mentors and my referees and so forth. Then Helen told me, she said, "Don't grab the first thing that turns up. The point you enter into will be something that will be the benchmarking and the baselining of your career and the opportunities that can come to you."

She said, "With your international experience at McKinsey, all the things that you've done operationally, run big P&Ls and so forth, you're clearly headed for ASX50 directorships" and here am I thinking, "She's got this completely wrong. Any listed company is prepared to look at me." I'm doing that girl thing of I'm not prepared enough, I've got to do a bit more of this, a bit more of that. She's like, "No, you are not to even talk to anybody about a board unless it's in the ASX 50."

Off I went with my riding orders but then I get a call from a head hunter because Helen started to put the word out. It was for a company in the ASX 200 down towards the bottom. It really wasn't the right

thing for me at all so I was able to say, "I don't think that would be the right thing for me, these sorts of reasons." That was fair enough and the person was very charming about it.

Then the next one was something a bit similar, different head hunter, and I sort of said, "This is the reason." I thought, "If I get another one of these I'm just going to get into the process." Of course, the next call was from Wesfarmers. I was really taken aback. I think I was so taken aback that I was very authentic about the way I approached it. The chairman was in no misapprehension as to the sort of person he was contemplating putting on the board. That really helped me a lot through that process. That was Helen's first bit of great advice.

The second bit of great advice was to actually go on a jewel track process so I would have been fine to take a full-time executive role but I did want to be based in Perth. I knew that meant it would be a fly in/fly out type of opportunity because the types of roles that I had the right skills for in WA are pretty limited.

The beauty of that, even though I didn't find a full-time role, was that it kept me very busy exploring both of these things on my jewel track. I never got the feeling that I wasn't making forward progress in creating my new world. As it turned out, with the Wesfarmers directorship lots of other offers came, I could take my time and choose a couple of different things and, of course, that was how I joined the board of nbnCo as one of the founding directors because that was my government thing and then how I came to CBH as a co-operative so not a listed entity.

That's how I ended up with three very different things in my portfolio.

Samantha Sutherland:

Right. One of the things I wrote down when you were talking about Wesfarmers initially was you were sort of fresh out of the gate to get directorships and you went straight to Wesfarmers, which is pretty impressive. I wrote down, "How did you back yourself in doing this?" Because of exactly what you then just mentioned now about how many women get the feelings of imposter syndrome and who am I to do this? How important was Helen in helping you combat those types of feelings?

Diane Smith-Gander:

Helen was fantastic with that because she'd been there and done it before. She was able to draw the parallels and sometimes just ask the obvious question. She said to me, "Diane, you told me about these wonderful experiences you had when you were in the US and Europe with these really large global companies, with market caps three, four times the biggest companies on the Australian Exchange. Did you interact with the directors, the CEOs, the C suite?" "Well, of course, I did." She said, "Okay, now you're telling me you've got imposter syndrome about this directorship?" It was really quite interesting when someone just calls you on it and goes, "Come on. Take a step back."

Of course, I did what I think many women do, which is I completely over-prepared. I think I read 10 years worth of annual reports and I had spreadsheets of ratios and I worked out what I thought the four big issues were in every business. Of course, that's not the job at all. You're not there to second guess management.

It did make me feel a bit more comfortable to get involved in understanding the business, in particular, the businesses that were not ones that I had exposure to through my McKinsey career. Of course, it was a time when Coles hadn't been very long in the Wesfarmers' stable, and I had done a lot of work in the United States and Europe in supermarket retailing. I was very aligned to the conversation that Coles was having about every day low pricing versus high/low promotional activity and what they were going through with private label and so forth.

When you can find some places where you do have some ability to make a contribution, that helps you get over that first step into the organization. I look back now after 11 years on the Wesfarmers board and can see some differences in the way the governance happens, differences in some of the sort of reporting that comes up to the board that was sparked by things that I'd learned in my executive career that I wasn't comfortable being a director without having access to management's perspective on those topics. I look back on that and go, "I've left a bit of a legacy in some places in Wesfarmers."

Samantha Sutherland:

Yeah. Yeah. Another thing I want to ask you about with that whole story, which I love how you said that Helen was the chairman of your board of mentors. I've also read things that you've said previously about how important mentors are to creating really strong careers. How did you go about recruiting the rest of the board of mentors? How did you know who to approach? How did you deal with that relationship? Mentors, the ones that I've had, have always been sort of fairly organic where you have a bit of relationship and then the person ends up becoming more than just a colleague or whatever. How did you manage that process and continue to manage that I suppose?

Diane Smith-Gander:

It was important for me at that particular moment to be with people who were really well connected but who had had a bit of exposure to me. I looked around the Westpac board table, which was the last place I had been working and I particularly thought, "Well, Caroline Hughson is there, Elizabeth Bryan" they're very experienced female directors and so I reached out to them to ask for their insights.

It doesn't necessarily have to develop into a deep mentoring relationship like I have with Helen that continues to today but can be very much point in time. I also had David Thodey and we had done quite a bit together because he had been running the institutional and wholesale piece at Telstra before he became CEO and I was running the IT piece at Westpac so I was one of his biggest customers, in the top three, so we had a lot to do with each other.

We'd been asked by a person that we knew in common, with completely different angles to knowing the two of us, to get involved with Basketball Australia, which at the time was going through a very difficult time because the men's national league wasn't traveling particularly well. The sports commission was worried about how the sport would pull itself up by its own bootstraps. They had asked for a steering committee to be pulled together and David was part of that as was I - talking about this common thread.

He had quite a bit of exposure to me. It was a natural person, well connected in the business community that could also give me a bit of advice about how executor groups were in the places that I was considering in. It was a little bit of who is going to be able to help me build the thing I'm missing in Australia, which is my network. Because, I wasn't worried about skills and expertise and how I would present and perform once I got there. It was really about extending that network and understanding what the opportunities were and who are the good head hunters to talk to.

I also knew Kerrie Burgess at Spencer Stuart who is a very well regarded head hunter and she's someone that I had worked with over the years. She'd recruited people and approached me about roles and so forth. There was another trusted source for me. It was a little bit different in that it couldn't just be people that had something that I needed and were prepared to share it with me but they had to know a bit about me and my situation because I was looking for a bit of that calibration. It made it somewhat different to the usual mentoring selection process.

Samantha Sutherland:

Because you had identified your specific need of building the network?

Diane Smith-Gander:

Exactly. Yeah. And the things that you miss when you've been away for eight years. Of course, I was in Perth as well so I had a really interesting mentor in Perth in my brother so my brother had been in the Army for a number of years and then he'd come home to Perth and had worked in the finance sector, been an investment banker and then bought a business from the founder and so was running his own business.

We had the same surname and he was quite well known around town because of that investment banking but also because he was very involved in life-saving and hockey and cycling and all sorts of other outdoorsy type pursuits, which is where many of the people in Perth, particularly, men, who are the ones who have got the opportunity sort of hang out.

I was able to use my brother as a door opener and I remember I was asked at one point by a journalist, "Well, don't you think Perth is a boy's club?" I said, "Yeah, you know, it is actually a boy's club here but the funny thing about it is if you bash on the door loud enough they'll open the door to see who's there." That's what my brother did for me.

My brother taught me where the door was, who were the people who would open the door, and so that was actually quite interesting because, of course, people would say to me, "Smith-Gander, are you married to Craig?" I'd go, "No. I'm his sister. I'm his older sister" and then they'd look at me properly and go, "Oh, yeah. You really look like him. There's a great family resemblance."

Then they'd say, "Are you into sport like him?" I had been gone from Perth for 24 years. I had been gone from Australia for eight but 24 years since I had been in Perth. The people that remembered me from Melbourne Senior High School and part-time economics degree at UWA and basketball were not really the people that were going to be opening doors to that boy's club for me.

Samantha Sutherland:

If you were talking to somebody who was maybe not quite ready to be looking for board positions but maybe is trying to break into executive leadership level, what advice would you give to them around identifying the gaps, identifying what they need in a mentor, and then finding those mentors? I love what you said about how your brother helped you find where the door was and who can open it. I think that's a big part of it is if you're out of the club it's hard to find where the club house is.

Diane Smith-Gander:

Yes. Exactly right. You know, the thing is mentors are fantastic but they are about giving you insight into something that you don't know about. The mentors that I've described who had to know a bit about me, part of the reason for that was because they would be able to de-risk the conversation for a chairman or a head hunter who was thinking about putting me on a list for a board position because they would be able to say, as Helen was able to say, "This won't be an issue. She can operate at that level. She's this, she's that, she's the other."

Without some exposure, people can't do that for you and that's not a mentor. That's actually getting to supporter territory.

Samantha Sutherland:

Yeah. Sponsorship.

Diane Smith-Gander:

Yeah. Sponsorship, supporting. You know, it's a sweeping generalization but women, in my experience, do tend to be a bit more comfortable with heading towards the mentoring because I'll continue to prepare myself or I'll find new things that are my weaknesses or my gaps and I'll work with my mentors to fill that and then somehow, automatically, they, in the quotes, they will somehow know I'm here. The supporter's job is actually that, of letting people who have got the next opportunity, know you're there and de-risking that.

Within your own organization or maybe in organizations that you aspire to join, you need to find these people who can be your supporters. Also, they're great because they bolster up your confidence and they can say, "Yes, this would be a really good thing for you to aspire to. It would be a logical next step. Yes, I do think you can get up there and get it done."

I would encourage people to try to find that supporter along the way and their supporter can also be very helpful in telling you who the next mentor might be, what might be the next skill or how you might address that. I don't like to talk about gaps and weaknesses because I think it's very, very hard to fill them and often, you can't be great at everything, you can't have a distinctive skill in every single thing that's needed to lead your organization or to get a particular task done. That's why we work in teams. That's why it's the best way for people to work in most settings.

If you're perfect at everything then where's the place for your team members to contribute? I had a fantastic boss in Westpac at one point and got a good job with Shell, who went on to be the chairman of the AIC bank. He was very solid on this. He said, "Diane, if you're not recruiting someone you can't tell me what it is they do way, way better than you and not just on the technical things. I want to see it more on the EQ-type stuff as well. I don't want you to contemplate putting them on your team because I want you to be able to look at the work that you've got and know that you could give pieces of it to everyone else on your team."

I said, "That's becoming clearer to me why I keep getting some of the things on your list. What do you do with the time that's freed up?" He said, "Well, I use it to work across the organization and up the organization and to see what I can take off the plate of my boss, the CEO, and I also use it for thinking time."

I think that's really something that you need to get an approach to and understand what your strengths are and then learn how to recruit teams that have strengths that are different to you so that there aren't any weaknesses in the team.

When you think about it like that, it redefines the way you think about merit and if one of the things you don't have in your team is diversity, it makes actually being diverse meritorious.

Samantha Sutherland:

Yeah. That's a really interesting point actually. I was just before we got on this call, I was editing a podcast that I did with Fiona Vine. She's going to be part of season two as well. She said, "Merit at the moment is defined as do you look exactly the same as me and have you done exactly the same thing as me and done things the way they've always been done before?" I really like what you just said about how merit becomes about diversity because it's merit within a team context, not just you individually.

Diane Smith-Gander:

How lazy is that way of thinking about merit? Someone that looks like me, someone that's had the same experience as me, someone that knows how to do it the way we've always done it. It's so much harder to go, "What is the future of work looking like in my team? In my organization? What are the skills and

capabilities and experiences that are going to be necessary to, A, get the work done but also develop it in a positive way? How can I work out what's the right way to select people that have those skills and capabilities and attributes and experiences?"

It might be by reading a whole lot of resumes that some robot has culled off Linked In.

Samantha Sutherland:

Yeah. Absolutely. Based on the last job title.

Diane Smith-Gander:

Exactly. It's not going to look like that at all. It does seem that we all have to take way more accountability for writing super dense CVs because I sometimes think if I get another elegantly written, reverse chronology summary of someone's experience I'm going to want to poke my eye out with a stick.

What I actually want is to see a gobsmackingly good, grab my attention synthesis. You know yourself better than anybody else. If someone from Wesfarmers looked at my CV, "Oh, yeah. Partner at McKinsey, lived in New Jersey, , did a bit of work in pharmaceuticals. We don't have any pharmaceuticals." Then all of a sudden you're on the cutting room floor whereas my synthesis was I had spent the last eight years working across multiple industries in multiple geographies. I had worked on changing control situations so my core skill is being able to with very quick pattern recognition, assess the opportunities of where the two companies together are going to be greater than some of the parts and then working on how to achieve that in very quick time. If you're a conglomerate that manages portfolios you look at that and you go, "That's what we do. Tick."

Samantha Sutherland:

Yeah. We need that. Excellent!

Diane Smith-Gander:

Yeah. That's someone that's thought about what we do and understands what we do. It's synthesis, not summary. We know ourselves better than anybody else. We really need to take accountability for that synthesis.

Samantha Sutherland:

Yeah. Yeah.

In my extensive Googling of you before we talked, I actually saw that somewhere else you have said is that you don't subscribe to the idea of focusing on your weaknesses and trying to fill gaps. From a team perspective, that makes a lot of sense based on what you've just said.

Then also I really like that approach because I've done a bit of stuff with the Gallup strength's finder and their research has shown that when people focus on their strengths they actually improve by more than if they focus on their weaknesses, which makes sense because you're taking things you're already good at and you can really fly if you focus on the things that you really know how to do and then you find the people to fill the gaps. They get to focus on the thing they're best at. As a team, the sky is the limit.

Diane Smith-Gander:

Exactly right. You know, when you start to think about, what am I really good at? And go through some of these different testing processes and read a bit about it, you start to think of a different way of

thinking about what your skills and attributes and experience have added up to in terms of strengths and defining them in different ways.

You know, because sometimes people say, "I'm actually a pretty good project manager." It doesn't sound very exciting but the way I did project management and direction was all about harmony seeking. That's one of my great strengths is I'm a harmony seeker but at the same time I'm a confrontational copier, so harmony seeking, for me, doesn't mean conflict aversion. It actually means whenever there's a problem you take out the spotlight, you shine it right on it, you say, "Everybody, look here." You don't stop yelling until everybody has actually looked and then you resolve the issue. That's my core strength when it came to being an executive at Westpac is I didn't rest until issues were resolved because I wanted everyone to go forward harmoniously, because until things were sorted I was uncomfortable.

Samantha Sutherland:

That's so interesting. How did you learn that about yourself?

Diane Smith-Gander:

Well, because I did the Clifton's strengths' finder!

Samantha Sutherland:

Oh, so those are Gallup Strengths Finder results? Okay.

Diane Smith-Gander:

Yeah. Exactly. I was absolutely gobsmacked by the result that I got because I knew that I was very good at finding issues. I knew that I was very good at putting structure around the resolution frameworks. I knew I was really good at following up and holding people to account. I knew that I felt intensely uncomfortable if things were not resolved.

I didn't realize what all of that was adding up to until I took a step back, thought about what was in my kit bag a bit, was thinking a bit about what the next job might be and then realized, "Okay, right. Now I get it. I get why all these pieces are coming together." It sort of changed the way I thought about it.

Samantha Sutherland:

Yeah. That is really interesting. My top two on the Clifton strength's finder are communication and winning others over. It makes sense that I do this because I can have conversations with people and they feel comfortable and I want them to feel good and I want to find out about their story.

In a past life, I was the head of risk and data at Origin Energy, which is obviously a really technical role. The reason I was successful in that is because I was the first person who had come into that type of risk position and really wanted to work with the rest of the business instead of that kind of criticism that people have about risk sometimes being the tail that wags the dog. It's like the strengths that you have can actually still be applied in lots of different types of situations and scenarios.

Diane Smith-Gander:

Yeah. I think that's exactly right. You can always see why you had success in particular places and one of the things where you were less successful that will actually then give you some insight into, "Ah, okay. I was trying to do an unnatural act there. Probably shouldn't have signed up for that project or that task or that job."

Samantha Sutherland:

Yeah. Yeah. I want to talk a little bit about this current scenario. At the time of this interview, Melbourne has just seen a spike in COVID-19 cases. Generally, around Australia things are unlocking slowly but we're also in recession. You talked a little bit earlier about the potential future increase in flexible work options out of this period.

Also, we know that women have been more heavily impacted by COVID-19 related job losses so just one recent statistic I read on the ABC was that across the ACT in May there were 2080 less full-term jobs from May to June and 2000 of them were lost by women. In my Googling of you, one of the things you've said before is that gender diversity is a core economic issue and it's the single-biggest productivity lever we can pull.

I'm interested to hear from you what you think some of the things to come out of this period could and should be to help with Australia's recovery? And also potentially focus on gender equality within the workplace.

Diane Smith-Gander:

Yeah. This is a really interesting question because in the past when I've talked about this being an economic issue, it was grounded in the pre-COVID world where we had a good strong growing economy, we knew that we were facing an aging population, we knew that women coming out of universities at proportional rate, 51% of graduates, there was a few functional areas where less proportion, others are greater proportion but really it was grounded in knowing if we didn't use all of our talent, we would have to continue to import talent and we wouldn't be as efficient or effective. We would basically run out of workers in a way.

That increasing women's workforce participation and, particularly, the participation of working mothers because if you look across OECD countries where you've got a high participation rate for working mothers, you have a higher participation rate in the economy overall. It's pretty much a straight line correlation. You build a bigger pie to share amongst a larger number of workers and are overall the economy gets disproportionately bigger. That was the economic argument.

As you can see the flaw in that argument now as we move into lower levels of economic activity and unemployment rates the like of which we haven't seen for a long time. Within that envelope, we know that women have been over-represented in part-time jobs and in more precarious jobs and that's because of the inability of workplaces in general to be able to provide appropriate flexibility to support the care and responsibilities and the very heavy proportion of unpaid work that women have done because of cultural factors in our communities.

I was advocating for those pieces of infrastructure and institutions to change over time so that when there's an economic imperative, we would march through to a better place. Now you can see that this has become a much harder task and it's no surprise at all that women are disproportionately affected. We will go back to some of those cultural norms because women still do more of the unpaid work and it's still regarded that child care and elder care and so forth is more of a woman's job than a man's job. Given there is still a gender pay gap ranging between 30% to 22% depending on which state you're in, it's economically rational if there are fewer jobs to go around that the person in the household that has greater opportunity, the greater earning potential is the one that should go to work. No wonder that we're reverting to that old cultural norm in all practices.

What's the silver lining? Well, as I said, workplace flexibility is one of those silver linings and also we're at a different point in time where people are a lot more concerned about understanding the impact on minorities. It's not just gender. It's also the Black Lives Matter, these sorts of things. People are more

attuned to thinking about the broader equity across our society and trying to remove the real costs that come to these inequities.

I think that's the one thing that's going to help a bit but I do overall believe this is going to take us backwards, not forwards, for the next decade or so. It's a great shame but I think we have to be realistic about it and that doesn't mean that each individual woman shouldn't continue to advocate for her own level playing field and the people like me shouldn't keep working at the system level but it does make the task a bit harder.

Samantha Sutherland:

That actually leads directly to one of my follow on questions which is we often talk about this kind of stuff at a macro level and my question is what about the micro? You just said it doesn't mean individual women shouldn't try and push for a level playing field and then women like yourself who are in positions of power to try and change things from a systemic level. What would you say to an individual woman who still wants to try and advocate for themselves in this moment?

Diane Smith-Gander:

One of the most important things is that you don't play the gender card. It's a really hard thing to do on an individual level and it never looks good. I always say to people, "You do the absolute best job that you can and then you have to have the courageous conversation with the organization that you're working for" and that's with your team leader or your manager, whatever the supervisory structure is, and we know there's a double bind so that if women behave in ways that they're not expected to behave they will be disproportionately marked down for that behaviour.

This is the thing where a woman says, "My bonus wasn't big enough." They go, "You shouldn't have shone a spotlight. Now that we've looked at it we've decided we'll take a bit more of that bonus off you." Whereas if a man goes, "My bonus isn't big enough." They go, "Look at that initiative. Good on you, mate. We'll give you another 10%" and they'll take it off the woman next door. That's the double bind at its most crude level.

I'm not suggesting that you need to suck it up and keep your head down and so forth but you need to be cognizant of the way organizations are wired and how hard you can push. Sometimes I talk to groups of young women, and they get revved up and say they're going to do this, that, and the other and I say woah hold it there. Just have a think about what is the right way for you and your organization to be able to have the conversation about your aspirations and about equity.

I always say to people when it comes to pay time, you ask for transparency. How does the pay system work? Where does this level of pay position me? Am I above the median? Am I below the median? If I was to continue on this trajectory on this level of increase, where would it put me? Will I end up in the top corner of pay? The top this level of pay? Get your story lined up, understand what it is you're trying to achieve.

You know, what you're trying to get the message across is I'm interested in my career, I'm aspirational, I never use the word ambitious. I'm aspirational about where I want to go but it is important to me that I'm paid equitably. I want to understand it.

It's very reasonable. It's good inquiry. It's about understanding how the company works. It's about getting feedback. If I got an X percent increase, if I know that's in the lower end of increases, well, that's suggesting to me that my performance isn't where it needs to be and the expectation of the company of where I might go is not lined up with mine. There's nothing worse than having a misaligned view in any part of the world.

Having a courageous conversation and seeking transparency is the way that I suggest that individual people continue to push on this particular problem.

Samantha Sutherland:

Yeah. I think that's amazing advice. I think that pay transparency would be one of the number one tools to reduce and remove the gender pay gap. If it was transparent not just to individuals who are asking for it but just across organizations. Then you wouldn't be able to have the pay gap in the same way.

Diane Smith-Gander:

Yeah. Pay transparency is a really tricky thing. When you're a director at a listed company, you have to determine who are the key management personnel who have the ability to really do the job and then their pay is extremely transparent. Of course, what that does is it just tells the next company exactly how much they have to pay to attract that person.

Pay transparency does come with a bit of a double-edged sword in some places. I'm very fond of this sort of broad managing of pay scales and being very transparent about that sort of thing, "This role gets paid between this and this and this is broadly how the pay falls out across it and this is the percentage of bonuses that people got" and so it's like de-identified but there's the data and there's a little red dot in there and that's you.

You know where you sit in the population and you know your number and you know there's 10 people above you and three people below you but you don't know who they are. If you can design pay transparency like that then I'm all over it like a rash. If they start putting names on it, it causes more problems than it's going to solve.

Samantha Sutherland:

Yeah. Yeah. I've never actually heard that perspective before but it makes a lot of sense actually.

The question that I always finish the podcast interviews with is if you could go back in time, maybe 15 years and talk to younger Diane, what would you say to her about all that was to come and the lessons that you've learned along the way?

Diane Smith-Gander:

Sam, I have to go way, way more back than 15 years. I'm 62. I'll be 63 this birthday!

I have to go back 30 years, you know? You know, the thing is that I would say to that younger Diane, just keep on doing what you're doing but try to be a bit happier about it along the way. Try to find out earlier what are the things that really bring you joy and the things that really build your resilience.

If I had known more about my own need for personal space, my need for quiet time, my need for really strong one on one female relationships, those are the things that build my resilience. If I had known about that when I was 30, I probably wouldn't be doing much different to what I'm doing now but I would have been generally happier along the way.

I think when you can find that lovely blend of happy and achievement and strive and challenge, that's when you're going to bring the most of you to everything.

Samantha Sutherland:

I really hope you enjoyed today's chat. If you can help us spread the word by giving us a review on iTunes that helps even more people find Equality Talks. To find out more about our mission check out

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See you next time!