

EPISODE 127

[INTRO]

[00:00:02] ANNOUNCER: Welcome to The Mentor List.

[00:00:05] MALE: To turn you into the best version of you that's around.

[00:00:08] FEMALE: To seek support, then you need to allow yourself to be supported.

[00:00:12] FEMALE: To really have a point of difference.

[00:00:14] MALE: What is precious, what's really important, and then putting some boundary set.

[00:00:18] ANNOUNCER: The Mentor List specializes in interviews with top business minds. Gather their advice for your career. This is The Mentor List.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:31] SD: Welcome to The Mentor List. I'm Sharon Daly, Managing Director for Mentor List Talent, and I am co-hosting today's episode with a good friend and the Director of Mentor List's Digital and Advisory, Peter Jackowski.

[00:00:42] PJ: Thank you, Sharon. Thank you.

[00:00:44] SD: We are pumped about today's episode, another topic that we're super passionate about; women in leadership and particular in the tech industry. Today on the show, we have Lee Anne Harris, who is Executive General Manager of Business Services. She is on the Diversity and Inclusion Committee for VicTrack and on the Women in Transport Management Committee for the Department of Transport Victoria. Lee Anne commenced her career at the Commonwealth Bank of Australia, where she spent 16 years and gained broad

experience across a number of areas of the bank, including both technical and operational accounting areas and banking services.

After leaving Sydney to move to Melbourne, she worked in not-for-profit, oil and gas, philanthropy, property and IT business consulting. In 2015, Lee Anne moved to the public sector and worked at the Victorian Department of Treasury and Finance in the budget and finance division, prior to commencing at VicTrack where she is currently EGM in Business Services. Lee Anne has an Executive Master in public administration through the Australian and New Zealand School of Government and the University of Melbourne, CPA graduate certificate in Applied Finance and B Commerce. She volunteers at Brighton Secondary College, a school counselor and treasurer. Wow.

[00:02:09] PJ: That's impressive resume. There's so much breadth, lots of sectors as well. Lots of –

[00:02:13] SD: Is there anything you don't do, Lee Anne?

[00:02:16] LAH: You make it sound so good Sharon.

[00:02:18] SD: That's amazing. Fantastic. All right. So, Lee Anne, that is an amazing career that we can see outlined right there. I wanted to dive a bit more into your journey. Can you talk us through your career path in a bit more detail and a bit more in-depth than what we've talked about there if you can?

[00:02:37] LAH: Well, firstly, thanks for having me here. I'm really excited to be here, Sharon. So thank you very much for inviting me.

[00:02:43] SD: A pleasure to have you, a pleasure.

[00:02:44] LAH: Look, I think my career journey has been a bit of a winding tale. It hasn't really been a very linear journey, which I think is a familiar story for a lot of women. I think that when I first started at the Commonwealth Bank as a university graduate, I never expected to be living in Melbourne. I never expected to be then in the public sector. So I think it's interesting that your

career journey as in life doesn't really sometimes go out the way you've planned it or expected. So I think, for me, certainly that wasn't the plan.

I started off in business banking at Parramatta in Sydney, and I was there for four years. Then I moved into head office and did a number of different roles in head office in Sydney; tax accounting, risk, and stayed there for quite some time. If we were still in Sydney, perhaps I would still be there. I don't know. But then as life would have it moving to Melbourne, I got the opportunity to try a few different things and I was really open to it. So being open to new experiences, new cultures mean different people. I think having an accounting and finance background helps because those skills are always needed in different industries, and it was easy for me to move around.

I moved into philanthropy and I worked for a year there. Then from that area, I decided to go and work in an oil and gas startup, so it was quite different. It also helped me manage my work and life family. I had a small family at the time, and it was an interesting space, having come from a really large Commonwealth Bank of Australia head office to then go to a small philanthropy, about 15 people, to then move to an even smaller organization of about seven people. Trying to get the business to work in oil and gas exploration is very tough. We did drill a well. It didn't quite work out the way I planned it, and so then I was off again, looking for something else.

I spent some time working as an IT business consultant at Oracle, and that was exciting, until I landed the Department of Treasury and Finance opportunity, which is where I picked up the Executive Masters of Public Administration. I spent four years there, and it was really interesting, and I really enjoyed working at Treasury. I've learnt a lot and I can really see the difference between the private and public sector. I think also with the studies in policy, that angle really was quite different to working for a profit organization at the Commonwealth Bank.

Then from there, I got the opportunity to move to VicTrack as a GM of Finance. I thought, yes, definitely this is really good. I'll be able to kill this. It was an excellent role, really great foundation for me just to consolidate my knowledge, manage a team. Then I got the opportunity to step up into the executive general manager role, which I'm now working with a

multidisciplinary team across legal finance, health and safety, risk, and procurement. So really great opportunities, really grateful to have had them.

[00:05:53] SD: Yeah, I love that. I think for our listeners, as well, listening to that Lee Anne, the journey that you've been on, it just goes to show you don't need to pigeonhole yourself anywhere and you can grow from a small organization to a bigger organization. So that's fantastic to hear, like the growth and the movements of locations and industry. You made it all work. Look at where you are now. So it's all fantastic.

[00:06:17] LAH: All the experiences that you have, they all add up. They accumulate. So it's something that I've sort of when I've reflected back, I thought, "Oh, wow. Why did I stay there for so long?" But you can sometimes be enjoying a role, and sometimes you can be afraid to leave.

[00:06:29] SD: That's it.

[00:06:30] LAH: I think once you feel like you're afraid to leave, that's the time you should move on.

[00:06:33] SD: That's it. Yeah. We get too complacent.

[00:06:36] LAH: Yeah. If you're enjoying it, it's fine. Stay because there's still clearly a path for you, and you've got goals that you're achieving.

[00:06:44] SD: That's right.

[00:06:45] LAH: But I think that all of the experiences you have make you who you are. I think that that's really important because you take them with you. You don't lose them.

[00:06:54] SD: Absolutely.

[00:06:55] PJ: Now, that's brilliant, Lee Anne. I'm really interested in working across a myriad of different sectors, large scale organizations, startup enterprises. Perhaps for listeners, what are

some of the lessons learned in terms of how you're able to adapt and adjust so well to very different environments? I got really interested to sort of understand your perspective on that.

[00:07:17] LAH: Yeah. It's a good question. I think, I mean, we all have our own different styles. One of the things that has helped me is just to understand people a little bit, and to really listen and appreciate that person's journey and where they're coming from and also just to be humble. I think that's easy to be humble when you're not from a particular era, so from moving into philanthropy or going into oil and gas, from that industry. It's easy to be humble. It's easy to sit back and say, "Well, actually, I don't know. So why don't you tell me? Why don't I just listen? If I can help you, then that's what I'm here to do."

So going in with that attitude that you don't know because you don't and going into you care about the organization and the people that are there to actually help them, it just provides a really solid basis that people start to see that that's why you're there. That's why you've come into the organization to fill this gap of skills that they're missing.

I found it really quite easy though coming from the Commonwealth Bank because it's such a large organization and very complex to go to smaller organizations. I'm not saying that you couldn't do it the other way around. I just found it easier that way. I think because if you understand technically what you're supposed to be doing, then the rest can be learned, so the people side, the culture side. But you have to really breathe the room as well. You need to understand where you are in the organization and the culture and the behaviors of white people. People behave differently in different cultures, so I think being open to the experience and listening really helps move and adapt to different environments.

[00:09:03] SD: What is one thing you wish you knew when you began your career and kind of what advice would you give your former self, looking back?

[00:09:15] LAH: Okay. I wish I knew the thing we just talked about that it's okay to leave areas and explore and experiment and move on to different things. But you don't have to have a linear career path. I think that was really – I would have loved to have known that when I was younger. I think also too, people always speak about the experience from the issues, the way they see things because they are coming from their own experience. So if they're not very good at

finance or accounting, then they just automatically assume that you're not. So you have to just – If they are negative about that, “Well, you can't do that,” don't take that on board because they're coming from their position that they probably can't do it. Therefore, you just have to know yourself and have that self-belief and confidence.

I think that's what's helped me challenge people's opinions about myself because I know myself. Once you know who you are, it doesn't really matter what other people think. So I think that that would have been a great advice to get because I think certainly I have questioned who I am and I have held myself back because other people can't do those things, so they don't think that you can. But I would just say to myself, “Just go for it. You've got nothing to lose and just back yourself.” What was the second part of the question?

[00:10:38] SD: That was basically. You covered it. Yeah, wonderful. Look, we've covered what advice you'd give your former self. I guess what are the habits then that you feel have served you well in what you've been doing throughout your career path?

[00:10:51] LAH: Discipline. I think you have to have a certain level of discipline when you're working in certain – Well, with anything that you do really. If want to be good at it, you have to put in the effort. You've got to work hard at it. The self-discipline and the motivation has to come from yourself. It can't come from other people. Because if you want it badly enough, then you'll be able to get it.

Also, honesty. I'm very honest. I find it really hard to lie to people. So not just honest with others but honest with yourself. I think that honesty, if you have that honesty about you that you are honest with other people and yourself, then you can see when other people are being a bit disingenuous. You'd kind of think, “Okay. Well, I know where you're coming from.” Then you can start to question motives and strategy of the other person or the other organization. So you're able to then disassemble what's actually happening in the moment and then be able to be a few steps ahead and plan strategically for how you want to get to where you want to go.

I think that that's really helped me and caring, so caring about what you do. If you don't care about the organization you're in or the people that you're working with at that point in time, go find somewhere else because you've really got to take care an interest in what you're doing.

Because otherwise why do it? Then high energy levels. Try to maintain high energy levels. Get a good night's sleep. Eat proper food. Whatever you have to do.

I exercise a lot outside of work, and that gives me lots of energy because it's a pretty full-on job. You need to be able to give your energy to it and then have time left over for yourself. So I think that those are the things that have really helped me.

[BREAK]

[00:12:34] ANNOUNCER: Today's podcast is brought to you by Mentor List, a collaboration of business services and professional growth. We connect the very best minds and insights in Australia to accelerate personal and organizational growth by leveraging and learning through lived experiences. If you love what you hear and want your own direct access to great minds, visit us online to learn more about our mastermind groups, business advisory, digital solutions, and our talent division. We are mentorlist.com.

[INTERVIEW RESUMED]

[00:13:16] PJ: That's great, Lee Anne. I'm really intrigued by the energy portion of that in terms of the exercise and the self-care and looking after yourself. Could you share for listeners a bit in terms of the discipline, how you maintain disciplines. Take in the winter months. No one wants to exercise. I'm a seasonal exercising kind of guy. Share with people I think in terms of how you approached that. Obviously, you've shared around the benefits from that, but just a bit how to motivate yourself in the sort of winter months perhaps in terms of that exercise and maintaining that discipline.

[00:13:47] LAH: Yeah. It's a good question. For me, because when I'm in my work mode, I tend to really focus. Sometimes, I'm isolated because I'm not in a team now, literally. I've sort of managed other people and I do talk to other people and I'm on meetings all day back to back. I am in a team, and I collaborate and all of that, but I'm not – It's different when you're in a smaller team, and someone's sort of managing you. You're now managing others.

I find with my exercise outside of work, I like to go to places or exercise where I can make friends. So when I go there, I'm not actually looking forward to much of the exercise at six o'clock in the morning at the gym. I'm actually looking forward to catching up with my friends, the social side.

[00:14:39] PJ: With social.

[00:14:40] SD: That's great. That's a great way to look at.

[00:14:42] LAH: I know they're there, the trainer. I've made personal relationships with these people, and so it's kind of like two in one. I get to see personally the people that I really enjoy spending time with, and we're actually doing something. That's fun once you start. It's hard to get there. It totally is hard to get up. I totally agree with you. But I also play woman soccer, and that's in winter, and it's outside. Sometimes, I don't feel like going, but the thing that motivates me is I'm part of a team, and I don't want to let them down.

[00:15:12] SD: Yeah. That's awesome.

[00:15:13] LAH: Yeah. So it's really fun.

[00:15:15] SD: Yeah, it is. Lee Anne, as a woman in leadership, so you overcome a lack of diversity and the challenge, I guess, this has created. So we know we're right in saying that in finance and technology, we know there's a lack of diversity and gender equality. Yeah. So I wanted to ask you a bit more around that aspect. How have you as a woman in leadership like dealt with that? Would it be fair to say that that is something that's in finance as much as it is in technology?

[00:15:45] LAH: It was I think when I was at the Commonwealth Bank, especially when I moved to head office. I was one of three women on the floor. Certainly, when I was at business banking in Parramatta, I was – There were three women as well, and two were grads, so myself and another lady and then the receptionist. I've always sort of been in the minority.

Now, there's heaps of female in banking and financial services. I mean, there are so many. But I could say categorically I was one of the first. I can also say that I was one of the first at Commonwealth Bank to have been pregnant and came back to work after pregnancies, working part-time at such a sort of high level at the head office in Sydney. I've always been at that forefront, so it's always been quite normal for me. I grew up with two older brothers. I did karate as a child. It was always guys around, and I've always measured myself against men anyway, growing up. So I've always been, "Well, well. I'm better than you," to my brothers. It felt – The competitiveness I think translated into the workforce for me.

Then navigating that has been difficult though. It's not easy because there's always challenges when you're one of the first to do something, that I guess it comes back to whether you really want it badly enough or actually what you believe in. Even going to university, there was a lot more males when I went through. If you feel like you can do it and you're having success doing it, everything points to, well, you can do it. Therefore, why would you let that stop you?

[00:17:31] PJ: Brilliant insights. Lee Anne, you've invested greatly in terms of education and professional development, which is evident throughout your career and your journey. Perhaps for listeners you could share the importance and the value that you've placed on making that investment in yourself in terms of building your knowledge base, your capability, networking through that means as well, I'd anticipate. Could you share a bit in terms of the value that you've got from professional development throughout your journey?

[00:17:58] LAH: Yeah. I think, initially, you don't really know what you want to do. So a Bachelor of Commerce was quite a broad discipline to do. Then most recently, with the public administration, I did that specifically because I felt that I'd come from the private sector. I had qualifications in accounting. I have experience in finance. But I didn't really have policy skills and I recognize the gap. Plus, I also thought it would really help me with the networking that you were talking about, going through the Australian and New Zealand School of Government because what they do is they take like 150 people in one cohort.

Then you go through your two years with those same people. The way that that program was structured was there was a lot of face-to-face with the same people. These people were all across government, so they're all in Commonwealth state, all across the country, different

states, different roles, responsibilities. It gave me a really great network just all at once. Stepping into a government, I got a network. I got policy skills all in two years. That could take 10 years to get. That would be the equivalent I think of someone in the public sector going to a private sector job and getting an MBA or an engineer getting an MBA.

Yeah, it does really speed up the curve for you. You're also able to draw on those experiences later on in your career. Even now at VicTrack, I understand the policy side of things and I can understand how government works because I've actually spent some time and I've also had the experience working in central government, which has helped. But I think there's a lot to say about learning through the experience of others.

[00:19:56] PJ: Yeah, absolutely fascinating.

[00:19:59] SD: On your journey, let's say, is there any one that inspired you to be a leader and why?

[00:20:07] LAH: Yes. I thought about this very closely. I think at different times, there's different people. Sometimes, I look. Watching television, I think, "Wow, that person's fantastic." It doesn't really matter. I'm not going to give you a name because it doesn't really matter. I'm not looking at somebody in a particular industry or at the time. I'm just looking at that person as an individual and the top of their field, or they're really enjoying what they do. I think, "Well, that's leadership." They're really enjoying what they do, and clearly they have passion for it. Clearly, they have a goal for it.

I recall when I was really young. I just looked around and I thought, "Wow, this world. It's not really equal, is it? It's not really fair." I think that inspired me because I felt like, "Oh, maybe I could do something that could help it and change it." Because I feel like we're not using all of our talent to address the really difficult wicked problems. I think what we're doing is we're taking the people in privileged positions and giving those people the opportunities to solve these really difficult problems. That's fine, except are they the right people? Do they have the right skill set or capability or intellect to be able to solve those problems?

That's what I noticed as a really young child and that's what inspired me to be a leader because I felt like I could make a difference. By being different, I bring those different experiences to help me solve problems into whatever field it is that I would go to.

[00:21:51] SD: Yeah, awesome.

[00:21:51] LAH: Does that –

[00:21:51] SD: Thanks, Lee Anne. Yeah, we need more people like you in the world today, so definitely. Following on from that and for our listeners today, what would you say is the importance and what are your thoughts on the importance of having a mentor?

[00:22:08] LAH: I think mentors, like the professional development side, can really speed up your learning curve. They can also provide really invaluable support. So in those moments where you doubt yourself, your mentor is there to say, “Well, hang on. No, you've got this. You'll be fine.” I think even if they don't say anything, you don't want to let them down.

[00:22:27] PJ: It's a motivator for you.

[00:22:28] LAH: Yeah. It's a motivator and a bit of a partnership, unwritten partnership. It is really important, but I don't think you have to have a formal mentorship. So you can be mentored by somebody, and it's not called mentoring, but that's what they're doing. I think those are really powerful because, for instance, where I am now, my old boss, he probably doesn't realize I'm using him as a mentor, but I am. He's done this role before. So I asked him for advice and get insights because I know he's already had success in the role. I might not do everything that he had the way he does it but I'll take away like learning and that wisdom.

Similarly, where I am now, I've got colleagues across different disciplines. If I need to understand more, I'll ask them questions and advice. Then I'll go back for a bit more, and I'll tell them how I approached it and see what they have to say. That's mentorship as well. Those types of relationships are important. Then I think if you're looking to move outside of where you currently are, it's good to have mentors or people in those places where you want to move to, to

give you those insights and help you make a decision about whether you want to go that way or not.

[00:23:50] SD: I guess in your career or personal life as well, is there any quote that you live by?

[00:23:57] LAH: I looked up this quote. It's something that I do live by. I've read about it not too long ago, so I'll say it. "Your beliefs become your thoughts, your thoughts become your words, your words become your actions, your actions become your habits, your habits become your values, and your values become your destiny," by Gandhi. I feel like that really resonated with me because I find that to change, you've really just got to change your mindset. That's all in your head. So if you feel like you want to do something, it comes back to what are the thoughts that you've got in your, and what are the beliefs? Are your beliefs holding you back? Are those thoughts holding you back? Because they just translate into the actions and that those actions become what you do, and that ends up being your life. So that's how I live my life by that.

[00:24:49] SD: Love it. Yeah, fantastic. That's actually one of mine as well. I have it in my phone saved — So there you go. Yeah, that's fantastic. I want to say, Lee Anne, it's been an absolute pleasure having you on the show today. I'm sure the listeners will join me in saying that you're an absolute inspiration, and we need more people like you in the world. Thank you for being so open and honest today and sharing your in-depth views in all these areas and particularly your journey throughout your career. I'm sure a lot of our listeners will be able to resonate with a lot of what you say and also be able to implement a lot of those ideas into their everyday life as well. So thank you so much for being on the show. We look forward to continuing to follow your journey as well.

Thank you for joining us on this show. Until next time, listeners, we are Mentor List.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:25:41] PJ: Thank you for joining us today at The Mentor List. If you'd like to hear more or speak to us about recommending our next interview guest, come on through to mentorlist.com.au. You can also find out more about our suite of mastermind series taking

shape in your area, your industry, and your discipline. We look forward to welcoming you to one of our events very soon. Stay tuned for another great show.

[OUTRO]

[00:26:10] ANNOUNCER: Thank you for listening to The Mentor List. If you like what you're hearing on The Mentor List, the best way to support the show is to just take a few seconds to leave a rating and/or a comment over on iTunes. You can also find further information about this show and links to further episodes at mentorlist.com.au. Until next time, this is The Mentor List.

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