# Transcript

**Thought Leadership Series: Women in Leadership**

PENELOPE ELLIS:   
Hello, and welcome to our first Thought Leadership Series webinar of 2025, and our first Academy Alumni event. We're excited to have over 320 people joining us today. The Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership operates across the many lands of Victoria, with sites in Melbourne, CBD and North Melbourne, and seven centres across regional Victoria, Bairnsdale, Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong, Mildura, Moe and Shepparton. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the Wadawurrung people, the traditional owners of the country I am on today, and the traditional owners throughout Victoria, and pay respect to the ongoing living cultures of first people. I would also like to acknowledge the contributions of First Peoples to the education of all children and people in this country. I also pay my respects to First Nations people joining us today. My name is Penny Ellis, and I am the manager of the Ballarat Academy Centre, having previously been a principal in residence at the Academy before going on family leave mid last year to have my second child.

I feel fortunate to be working at the Academy over the past two and a half years, having previously been a principal at Magpie Primary School and assistant principal at Daylesford College. I'm a mother, a daughter, a wife and a sister, all roles that empower me each and every day to ensure equity and excellence for young people throughout Victoria. We're here today to celebrate the progress made towards gender equality in education, and to have an honest discussion about the barriers that still exist. We're going to hear from three incredible female leaders in education who have forged their own paths and are committed to creating more opportunities for others. They will share their experiences and insights on what we can all do to help progressing gender equality. Firstly, I'd like to introduce Dr Marcia Devlin, the inaugural CEO of the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership. Marcia has more than 30 years of experience in education, and in 2023 was awarded a member of the Order of Australia for her significant contributions to education and gender equity.

Joining Marcia is Professor Elizabeth Labone. Elizabeth is the CEO of the Victorian Catholic Education Authority. She is a highly experienced executive leader who has held multiple senior leadership positions over the past three decades. Elizabeth brings a wealth of expertise in governance and compliance to strategic development and stakeholder engagement to today's discussion. And lastly, I would like to introduce Angela Singh (a proud Yorta Yorta woman and the Deputy Secretary for First Nations Strategy, Policy and programs. Over the past 30 years, Angela has had a range of leadership roles where she has accelerated work to support better outcomes for first people across early childhood and education throughout Victoria. Please join me in welcoming Marcia, Elizabeth and Angela, as we come together to hear expert insights about creating a more inclusive future in educational leadership. Just before we begin the discussion, we are joining together through WebEx webinar, and that means you are unable to access the chat and that your camera will remain off.

However, you are all emailed a link to Slido, so please jump on there and answer any questions, I'm sorry, we'll answer the questions, ask any questions or vote up questions that you would like answered. But please keep in mind that we're not able to get to everything with only an hour together. So, to get started, I think it's really important to look backwards before we look forwards. And I personally often reflect on my first job, a cashier at Safeway in Monbulk, and think about the many lessons I learned that supported me in my first role at Emerald Secondary College. So, Elizabeth, we'll start with you. You're a very highly successful leader now, but we've all started somewhere. So, what was your first job?

ELIZABETH LABONE:   
Thanks, Penny. My first job was actually on cashier as well at Franklins, but I thought I'd talk about my first jobs in education. So, my first job was in the ACT, and it was a relief from face to face role in a school. And that school had, was quite a low socioeconomic, had low socioeconomic population. And a lot of the kids from the school were in residential respite care from foster between or between foster care homes. So, it was a really challenging role. And then immediately after that, I went into a full time teaching role where I had 34 kindies, mainly about 93% of them from non-English speaking backgrounds and who had not been to pre-school. So, again, that was a challenging role. And I think in both of those cases, what I learnt was it was really, I was really pleased I had the opportunity to put myself in an environment that was very different to my own upbringing. I was a girl from the Northern Beaches. Here I was, had these really different experiences. And I think what that helped do was develop my understanding, my empathy, my resilience and different perspectives.

And they've stayed with me, I think, and helped me throughout my career. So, those opportunities that you have to really challenge yourself in those early jobs, I think, are really important.

PENELOPE ELLIS:

Thanks, Elizabeth. Angela, how about yourself?

ANGELA SINGH:

Good morning, everyone. I'm dialling in from Dandenong, so Bunnerong country, but also wanted to acknowledge Wiradjuri, because that's where my office is based. I wasn't going to count my first job of delivering papers. You know, those local papers in secondary school. And I couldn't ride a bike at the time, so I walked the streets with the papers in my Hessian bag. So, that was my first job that attracted a very, very modest pay. And then I think I started thinking about, you know, my first, my transition to my first kind of real work experiences. And when I was at uni, I was employed as an ATAC tutor. And so, that's the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme. So, I worked as a tutor at Dandenong Aboriginal Cooperative, where I tutored primary and secondary school students. And then my first real full time job was on the Victorian Public Service Graduate Program. So, I had graduated uni. I'd finished an economics degree at Monash uni and I didn't know what to do. And so, by going on the graduate program, I think I bought myself an extra one year of thinking time.

And had the opportunity to work across three different government departments, had (INAUDIBLE) and had some really great access to professional learning. And I think that was a really great start for me and just what I needed fresh out of uni.

PENELOPE ELLIS:

Thanks. Amazing that you started in the public service and here you are back in it again. So, a little bit of a full circle. Marcia, we might hear from you.

MARCIA DEVLIN:

Yeah, thanks. Morning, everyone. Yeah. So, my first job was also in Woolworths. And in the old days, there used to be two people on the checkout. There was the checkout chick, but you had to graduate to that. So, I started as a grocery packer down the end, and they used to throw the frozen chickens down really fast and try and break your fingers. But I didn't get a broken finger, so that was good. My first real job was at Barnardos Australia. So, very similar to Elizabeth, actually, in a residential unit for kids who are trying to keep out of juvenile detention. And yeah, that was a real experience and really taught me a lot of skills. I decided while I was working there that I wanted to go into education because I thought if these kids that had a better experience of school, they'd all left school, like, quite young. They might have stayed there and they it was really difficult to think about what their futures might be. They had very difficult family situations, but they also had no education.

They hadn't finished year ten, etc, so trying to get a job was really difficult. So, that was part of my decision making to go into education, because I do think education is the answer to every issue in the world. And I can't think of a single one where it wouldn't help. Yeah. So, that was my first job at Barnardos.

PENELOPE ELLIS:

A real theme of them supporting equity across different areas of Australia. It's so nice to hear. And Marcia, so thinking about your pathway from Barnardos to where you are now, what have been some of the barriers that you have faced and what's enabled you to overcome them?

MARCIA DEVLIN:

Yeah. So, it was really interesting thinking about this question. I think the biggest barrier for me as a woman has been being underestimated and then overlooked. And I see Elizabeth nodding and Angela nodding as well. So, you know, I'm female, so, you know, automatically that, you know, you're not seen as somebody who should be in leadership, certainly in my era as I was coming through. I'm also quite short, and I know that's not the case now, but I did look much younger than my age for most of my life. So, I kind of looked at this little girl turning up to work. So, I'd see blokes, you know, who were at the same level or even below me getting opportunities to act in leadership roles. But I was very rarely asked. And you know, when I got more senior and more confident, I actually asked one time when I was a deputy vice chancellor and the vice chancellor left. And so, suddenly there was a bloke acting in the vice chancellor job. And so, I went to some council members I know, and I said, "Why wasn't I considered?" And one of them said to me, "Oh, we didn't even think of you." Even though I presented to council regularly, I was by far the highest performing deputy vice chancellor, you know, but it was the slightly or this little girl over there sort of doing helpful work.

So, I think being underestimated. But that really helped me in a way, because I really got quite angry about that and determined in a very calm way, because you can't be emotional at work if you're a woman because that works against you. You know, and I got offered this opportunity, opportunity in inverted commas once to a leadership opportunity when we were moving offices at one place I worked. No names, no details, and the director of the centre I was working in offered me the opportunity to do the refurbishment of the new office, carpets, curtains, colours, everything. That would all be my jo. And I mean, it was a research centre and I was the deputy director and I have no interest in carpets and curtains and colours. I know that some people think, well, I had to ring my husband and say, "Do we have curtains or blinds on our house at home?" Because I had no idea. So, I got offered this opportunity to do something I had no interest in that wouldn't have developed my leadership skills.

And it didn't ask any men to do the carpets and the curtains and the colours, but you know, asked me. So, I got really, really determined, let's say, not angry. And then I started to think about what do I need to do? And I need to understand that there are these barriers that this is the way I'm seeing. It's the way a lot of women are seen and make a plan. I'm a big fan of making a career plan. Your lights going on and off, Penny. That's OK.

PENELOPE ELLIS:

I know my shine's been dulled by our automatic lights. Sorry, Marcia. (LAUGH)

MARCIA DEVLIN:  
You have to jump up and clap or something. Yeah. So, just making a plan and a career plan. So, I've always had a plan, like a ten year plan, a five year plan, a one year plan, you know, monthly plan, weekly plan, whatever. Because I think as a woman if you don't plan that and really carefully think about what professional learning, what qualifications, what experience you need to get to the next step, you might get overlooked. So, that's one of the things I've done is really be very deliberate about planning out my career. What's my next job? How do I get there? Who do I need to network with, etc? Really thinking very carefully about what to do more of and what to do less of, and I might talk a little bit more about that later. So, for example, do less housework, right? My bathroom is not sparkling and clean and my house is not ready for home beautiful to come around and do a photo shoot, but I've done really well at work, right? So, I think women sometimes gatekeep these standards of, you know, womanly things.

So, making sure the house is perfect and the clothes are all, you know, folded perfectly and colour coordinated and so forth. If it brings you joy to do that, sure. But you're using up a lot of time and energy that you could be using at work. So, doing more of what counted at work for advancement and less of what didn't count, which is having a perfectly clean and tidy house. And also, women do a lot of the housework at work. And so, you know, pointing that out, not always being the one that's doing the note taking and the washing up after morning tea and so forth and so on. Because that doesn't count for your advancement, but you're often expected to do that kind of thing. So, I think in summary, it's been gendered expectations that have held me back. And that's been the biggest barrier. And my to overcome that is to really understand that really carefully and then plan and organise around that so that as far as I'm able to, I'm not held back by those gendered expectations.

PENELOPE ELLIS:  
Thanks, Marcia. I just want to pick up on a theme that's also come through the Slido about that planning for your career, and that's something that you've regularly really done. Is that something that you've done by yourself, or have you called upon some expertise to support you in that area? What does that look like?

MARCIA DEVLIN:  
For me, it's very much been done myself. There's a lot of support for women around these days and these kind of webinars and all that kind of thing. That wasn't around when I was starting out in my career, you know, 30 plus years ago. So, I just do it. I keep a journal. I've kept a journal since I was 11. That's really helpful. So, reflecting on that and writing down in there, and I'd work out, you know, what year it was, how old I was and then how old I'd be each of those years. And then I have two children, two beautiful sons. You know, how old they were, what grade they were in, what I would need to do so that when one was starting school, I don't want to be taking a big job that year because, you know, kids need transition to school to be smooth, etc, and then the next one, two years later, the same thing. So, I've always planned it out, you know, and my husband's found my plans a couple of times and gone, "I'm not in here." I go, "That's right. You're just there. You're just, you know, helping." (LAUGH) I don't need to know what age you are, but I do need to know, you know, how old is the child?

Are they two? Are they three? Are they four? Are they 15? You know, I found teenagers need a lot more attention and care than, you know, you've got to be around a bit more than, you know, when they're younger. And you can put them into childcare with fully qualified staff and lock the gates, and they're in there for the day. But when they're teenagers, you don't know where they are. So, I chose not to take big jobs at certain years when we were going through the teenage years, which, you know, can be quite challenging. So, it's something I've done myself. And I've kind of got better at it over time. But I found that enormously helpful. A very senior man said to me recently, I don't know all this talk about career conversations and plans. I've never had a career plan. And I looked at it and thought, yeah, he's white, he's male, he's tall, he's highly educated, he's middle class. Of course, he hasn't had to have a career plan because he's just sailed through. But that's not what happens for most women.

And women of colour, women with disability, women with, you know, intersectional people, it's very much more difficult and you will get overlooked and you will have limitations put on you in people's minds. So, being really deliberate about where you want to go and how to get there. And of course, things change, you know, that you make your plan and then, you know, life happens, but at least you've got a sort of general direction, you know, where you want to get to.

PENELOPE ELLIS:  
Yeah. I think about, I know my mum took long service leave, for example, when I did year 12, so that she was there to support me through that. And it was something that I still remember, you know, about her taking that break from her career to really support me at an important time. And also, thinking about what we can outsource in life. And I think that speaks to the housework. So, you know, for myself, I've got an eight month old and a and a three year old at home. And so, I have a cleaner come once a fortnight to clean the kitchen and the bathroom. And really, it just makes me put everything away one night every two weeks. So, it's always a good thing to...

MARCIA DEVLIN:  
So, you clean up before the cleaner comes. Absolutely.

PENELOPE ELLIS:  
Tidy before the cleaner, I tell my husband. But yes, that's right. Elizabeth, how about yourself? So, you started off in the North Shores. You started your work in Canberra, and now you're in Victoria. What's that looked like for you? What's your journey been like to support you into where you've gotten today?

ELIZABETH LABONE:  
Oh, it's, I thought about this question, Penny, and I could answer it a lot of different ways. So, I'll go with whatever's going to happen at this point in time. (LAUGH) So, I think, I moved, I probably moved into leadership positions in the first instance by being prompted by more senior staff who were supportive and who valued what I did. And I think that's been a theme throughout my career, in that you do need to seek out those people who value you, who see your potential and who will support you, not just behind closed doors, but who will stick their neck out for you. And that's been really helpful. I think there are two buckets for me that have, in a way, been both barriers and enablers. One of those structures and policies and processes. And when I had my first child, the university I was working at at that point was one of the first places to have paid parental leave. It is now it was maternity leave back then, but we've moved on. But they had paid parental leave. And then by the time I had my third and fourth child, that had moved from six weeks to 12 months.

So, I think those advances in structures are really important. And then the policies that went with those, that gave you flexibility when you came back from parental leave, they really enabled me to continue with my career. Some of the challenges in that were childcare and the cost of childcare. And I remember when I went back after my fourth child, I think we worked out that I was going to work for $0.20 a week because of the cost of childcare. But we, you know, the decision was taken that if I didn't go back to work, I'd lose my position, I'd lose my career trajectory, I'd lose my super. So, there, I think there's still real challenges for women in terms of career break and what are the less obvious, I suppose, barriers, those types of things. I think also, you've got to have people who are willing to implement the policies and structure as well, because often things will fall down if you don't have, for example, a really strong HR department who's willing to support the policy implementation in a rigorous way.

And then there's the home life balance. That was really difficult. I ended up moving my third and fourth child to school near work, right near work. Now, people might say, oh, that's, you know, terrible because they were an hour away from home. But it worked out OK. It was good for me because I spent a lot of time in the car with them, talking to them before and after school. And I had access to be able to go and see events and things like that at school. So, that was really good. So, I think you have to work out what works for you and enables you to pursue your career. Those types of things did work for me. I think that there's, then there's this whole intangible kind of hidden barriers and those types of things that Marcia is referring to. The workplace culture, I think, was in some instances throughout my career a real barrier. And I thought about, well, what got me through those times when people were trying to undermine you or you were overlooked for leadership positions. And I honestly think it's those champions, the people who will be your champions and who will stand up and support you and promote you and give you the opportunities to promote yourself.

So, I think you need to find those and nurture those relationships. And I honestly wouldn't be where I am today without some really strong women who supported me through along the way, but also some really strong men who supported me. So, you know, I think that's not really a gendered thing in a way. It's people who can see your potential and champion that path for you. So, I'd say they were really important to me. And I think because we still have those cultural barriers in workplaces, I think self-belief, and I remember when I first went for a promotion to senior lecturer, someone read through, my direct line manager read through my application and said, "Oh, no, I'd do it this way, this way, this way, this way." And so, then I put it in and I didn't get promoted. And then in a university cycle, you have to wait another year. In the debrief of promotion then, my dean at the time, who was a woman, said, "Oh, why did you do that? Or why did you do that? You should have presented it this way and that way." And that was actually the way I had had it in the beginning.

So, I think I learnt from that, that just believe in yourself and have the confidence to go with what you think is right. Because then I did do it that way the next time round, and I did get my promotion. So, yeah, hold your line, hold your self-belief and look for the people who support you.

PENELOPE ELLIS:  
On the people that support you. Elizabeth, I know I've been very lucky to have some wonderful champions in my working life, both currently and in the past. But how did you go about identifying who they were, and I guess, turning them into champions for you?

ELIZABETH LABONE:  
That's a good question. I think, when you're in a workplace and you can see who are kindred spirits, so you look for people who can see your potential. And those people generally, in my experience, have nurtured me and nurtured a relationship with me. So, I think they've found me more than I've found them. But there has been a flip side where I have been very deliberate in ensuring that I have managed up and built relationships with people in leadership positions who I know will be important for my career. So, it's been a deliberate decision to look for the people who can see your potential and do have a modus operandi that supports people in career trajectory, and then foster a relationship with those people. That's what I think. So, it's been a bit both ways people have found me, but I've also been very deliberate. And they do need to be in senior leadership positions, those people. You do need to find the people high up who will nurture you and support you. Colleagues are there for your day to day support, but in my experience, it's those in senior leadership that really help with the career trajectory.

PENELOPE ELLIS:  
Thank you. Angela, I saw you both nodding along. Is there anything you'd like to add in that space?

ANGELA SINGH:  
Well, unlike Marcia, I didn't have a plan. But I think what I do do is I invest in a lot of reflection. Yeah. So, it kind of regular intervals along the way and it seems to be a three to four year interval. You know, I ask myself, what am I doing? And I think being open to the possibilities. So, you know, being comfortable with not being comfortable and being comfortable with stretching yourself. So, I think, you know, sometimes we get comfortable in a space and we just kind of glide along. Yeah. And that's when, you know, when I start to feel I'm getting a little bit too comfortable. I do ask myself, what am I doing? You know, what's my next step? And being up for a challenge is really important. And I think, for me, you know, investing in education is really important. And so, I've done that. I've done much more, I've done a lot of study following my undergraduate degree. Yeah. And so, I think in part that's kind of trying to future proof my career. But it's also, you know, if you're working in education, you're kind of going to model it as well.

And so, you know, I've done a lot of tertiary study after my economics degree, including my grad dip in education, primary studies. But yeah, I think that's about, you know, modelling the commitment to education and also investing in future proofing. And you know, I've had the privilege of raising four children. My youngest is 23. And you know, I think sometimes it's a real grind. Yeah. And when you look back at what you did, juggling everything, we did it because it had to be done. And I think, you know, everybody in this virtual room is, we do what we do because it's important. And that includes raising a family, juggling work commitments and yeah, and doing our work. But we also do it because it's an integral part of who we are. And so, yeah, what really resonated with me is Marcia saying, you know, it's, you know, you can't have a perfect house and you know, and the whole career thing as well. So, yeah, I agree, some things need to, you need to give yourself a pass on some things and realise that sometimes you can engage in a whole lot of challenges in one space and it could be your career if your family life is going well.

And sometimes, you know, there's a bit of a challenge in your family life that might be where you're not necessarily stepping up to significant challenges in your career. Because, you know, as women, and I think as people, we're always kind of doing that balancing act. But giving yourself a pass and not being too hard on yourself, I think, is really important.

PENELOPE ELLIS:  
Thank you. And Angela, as the deputy secretary for First Nations Strategy, policy and Programs, how do you think that the education system could support more First women's, sorry, First Nations women into leadership?

ANGELA SINGH:  
Yeah. It's a really good question. I think when I reflect on it, number one, don't assume. So, don't assume First Nations women, First Nations people only want to work in identified roles in Aboriginal affairs. Because a lot of us do want to work in what we call, for want of a better word, a mainstream role. Although, you know, we can probably ask ourselves, well, you know, define mainstream now. So, I think don't assume. And if you've got a vacancy or a position going, think about promoting it widely, including to First Nations people. And I know we've got a career staff network email that goes out every week. And we often promote positions, both Aboriginal specific and mainstream positions in that role. So, yeah, I think the first thing I would say is don't assume where people want to work. Secondly, I think is we really need to work hard to recognise non-public sector skills and experiences. You know, often because we work in the public sector or we might work in education, we might think that somebody, if they haven't had an experience, isn't really suitable for a job or might not be the best fit.

And so, that's us challenging our own thinking and thinking really broadly about the skill sets that people bring. And you know, I think if First Nations people, you know, a lot of our mob work in Aboriginal community controlled organisations, well, you know, that requires working with diverse stakeholders. It requires problem solving, it requires a range of communication skills. And so, thinking about the important traits that somebody brings that might not necessarily be school specific or public service specific is really important. And flexibility is really important, I think. And I know this is a tricky space for schools. My last immediate job was regional director for North western Victoria region for just over three years. But I do think we need to ask, you know, if somebody, if we advertise a full time job and somebody says, you know, can I work part time? We need to be open to that possibility. And if we do agree to that, then we should think seriously about filling the balance of that position so that person isn't actually doing, you know, a full time job on part time hours.

I think we need to think about, you know, compacted hours where that's possible. I'm really conscious that a lot of First Nations people live in regional Victoria, and if we want to attract a really diverse workforce, how can we support that? And so, you know, for people working in central offices, if people are living in regional Victoria, we need to support them to be able to work out of their regional offices one or two days a week because that's about, you know, supporting people's personal circumstances. And I think particularly with First Nations people, think about how you can support them to still fulfil their community obligations. And you know, a lot of First Nations people might be on a board or a committee, and how we support First Nations people to engage in those opportunities is really important. And you know, that could be through a simple process as completing a conflict of interest declaration with appropriate management steps. It could be ensuring people access appropriate leave arrangements as well.

So, I think, you know, those kind of things, those four things, don't assume, recognise, broaden on PPS skill sets, flexibility and supporting people to engage in community obligations are really important things for us to consider.

PENELOPE ELLIS:  
Yeah, absolutely. I think there's so many things there to take away around being open minded as well and thinking about how we can apply policy, you know, in ways that support those around us. But can you also tell us about your pathway to leadership as a Yorta Yorta woman? We've heard a little bit from Marcia and Elizabeth, but I'm keen to hear from you.

ANGELA SINGH:  
Well, as I said, I didn't have a plan, didn't know what I wanted to do fresh out of uni, hence the VPS Graduate program. But I think I've always been attracted to social policy, and whether it's working in Aboriginal affairs, in employment programs, in youth affairs or education. Social policy has been my through line throughout. And again, and I've worked in State, Commonwealth and in a dual sector, TAFE University. I've worked in Melbourne, in Canberra, in Regional Victoria and a very small stint in Sydney. So again, I think that's about being open to the possibilities. And a little bit of anxiety in a job is normal. Yeah, not so much that you feel physically sick, but that's just about being at peace and being a little bit uncomfortable. And so, that's led me into opportunities to work in State and Commonwealth and at a dual sector institution as well. And as I said, investing in my education has been really important. And so, I was interested in TAFE teaching at a time. So I did a cert for training and assessment.

And when I was working at the dual sector, TAFE University, I did a little bit of TAFE teaching. I was really interested in, I called it my get out card is having a vocation behind me, and that's why I did my Grad Dip in Education in Primary Studies. But I also did a Grad Dip in Education in Curriculum and Policy, and I've done a Masters in Education and a Graduate in Management as well. So the education I've invested in is because of out of personal interest, but it's also helped me with some of my career thinking along the way. And again, and I've worked in mainstream and dedicated roles as well. And I think that ability to Dip in and Dip out is really important. And right now.. And my heart is in Aboriginal Affairs and in education. And so I'm very grateful right now that I'm able to combine both of them. And as I said, balancing family and career is... it can be really tricky. I've had the privilege of being surrounded by very strong Aboriginal women. And so that's always helped me get through a lot of things.

And I think it's interesting for women, I think sometimes I've heard a lot of us describe ourselves as lucky. Yeah? And for a long time, I use that word, I've been lucky. I think I'm transitioning to fortunate. But we are where we are because of our hard work. And sometimes I think by using the term lucky, we're discounting the work that we've done. And so we need to be comfortable in acknowledging our work. For me, it's still a work in progress. So I've transitioned from lucky to fortunate, but I do think that often we undersell ourselves, which was a comment made earlier.

PENELOPE ELLIS:  
Thanks, Angela. It is something that I think I've probably done as well is say that I'm lucky that I ended up at different things at different times. And when we reflect back, we have all got really great achievements that I think are worth drawing upon. Elizabeth, something that's come through from the Slido is about advice for emerging female leaders. So, are you able to share what helped you and what you could have... Sorry. Let me start again. So it is around, can you share your advice for emerging female leaders, what helped you and what would you have done differently?

ELIZABETH LABONE:  
OK. I think what helped me is taking up opportunities. So I've always had this approach where you never cut an opportunity off yourself. So if there's an opportunity for an internal role or an external role that you're interested in, put in for it and then let it cut itself off. That's been my approach all the way along. I think also, if you're on the fence and unsure if you're ready for that role, put in for it anyway. So I think we tend to second-guess or I've tended to second-guess myself a bit too much. So that's been my strategy to put in and let the role close itself off, if that's the way it's going to go. I think the other thing is seek advice and make sure that those people who do support you are in the loop in terms of your career progression and get that support along the way. So that's been really important, the networks. I think Angela has really said that really well, the bit about being uncomfortable. And I haven't really thought about it that way, but I think that's so true.

I do think you've got to have a level of discomfort, because without that level of discomfort, you're probably not challenging yourself and using your skill set and your expertise to its full potential. So I would say that all the way through my leadership path, there is a level of discomfort. I think that's a good way to describe it, because you do need to push yourself and be OK with that. And I suppose I'm a bit more like Angela than Marcia in that it hasn't always been planned, the trajectory. So take the opportunities as they arise. And I have done that, I've taken those opportunities and let my career progress in a way that suits me, but also in a way where I've seized an opportunity to move ahead, (INAUDIBLE) that. Yeah.

PENELOPE ELLIS:  
Thanks, Elizabeth. Marcia, I might just draw back upon when you spoke about what you did for yourself early on when you faced different barriers. But do you have similar advice for those who are going through perhaps emerging leadership roles themselves? What would you say to people currently starting off as leaders?

MARCIA DEVLIN:  
Yeah, so I just agree with so much of what's been said by Angela and Elizabeth. But I didn't have the good fortune to have those people helping me, so I didn't have the people pick you out and give you an opportunity, apart from at Woolworths, 'cause I progressed very quickly, seriously, from packing to checkout chick to supervisor of all the casuals. And so, Angela, I just think you've just hit a nail on the head there about the discomfort, because I was 16 and I was the supervisor for, there were 14 registered, 28 kids and teenagers who did the casual shift on Friday night and all day Saturday. And it was just I was so uncomfortable, I would say really stressed out in my brain. But discomfort is a better way to think about it. And when I think, I was just reflecting while you were both talking, when I think about how my career has progressed from an emerging leader to a new leader to a more established leader to a senior leader, it's never been smooth or easy. I often say to younger women, they say, oh, I'm not ready or it's a big step up, but it's a step up.

That's right. That's how you progress. You're not stepping down, you're not stepping. Sometimes you step sideways, but ultimately you're going up and you're always gonna be uncomfortable, unless you're a psychopath who's just totally comfortable in every situation. And your job is terrifying. I mean, coming into the public service after being in universities, terrifying. I didn't have any idea what I was doing, just no clue. And all these words and acronyms and briefings, oh my God, I said to my strategic advisor, can you make these briefings things stop, 'cause they're really stressing me out. She said, "That's literally your job now." It's like, oh my God, what have I done? What have I done? I've left the sector, I've come into this job, you know, really the discomfort. But I didn't have the people helping me. So I think it depends on your situation, it's very hard to get. Elizabeth's absolutely right, making relationships with people, looking for people, building those relationships, particularly with senior people.

But that's easier said than done, right? You kind of have to wait for people to do that. But if you wait, sometimes it doesn't happen. So I think it's a bit of a mix of drawing on those senior people in the relationships, but also pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps because you're female, in my case, because I was little and just overlooked. I had to kind of put myself forward and raise my profile. And women find that very uncomfortable. They find it very uncomfortable to talk about themselves. They find it, you know, even doing something like this. So why are you asking me? I don't know anything I said to you, Penny, when we were preparing. You should be the one talking. You're the one that's got the eight month old, my kids are in their 20s. They've got beards. They're fine. They don't need dressed and cared for and whatever. I mean, they just still do a little bit, but you know what I mean. They're out in the world, whereas you've got this literally. Your son is dependent on you for food.

So we all have this kind of imposter syndrome, and it's like, why am I here? But unless you push yourself and really put yourself in uncomfortable positions, challenge yourself, and as I said, sometimes you can't do that. Sometimes home requires you to be concentrating on home. And I certainly had that experience a number of times. The other thing is to define success for yourself. What does success mean for you? And it doesn't necessarily mean being the big boss in charge of everything. At one point I went from part-time to full-time. And when I told my then eight year old son, my youngest son, I'm going to full-time work, and it was a bit further away from home as an hour's drive, Elizabeth, that resonates as well. And the only thing he was concerned about was whether I would still be picking him up from school on Tuesdays to go to footy training. And so for that period of time, it was a big step up for me to be professor at another university. My goal was, my success criteria were I'll survive this job and try and meet the expectations at this much higher level, as well as picking Angus up from school on Tuesdays and going to footy training, 'cause I was the trainer, I was the, I mean, God help the team.

I was the one that ran them all around and warmed them up and stuff, and he was really like chuffed about that and quite proud because he wasn't a teenager then, that his mum was involved in the football. So I'd do that and warm them up, then hand them over to a real coach. But then I'd go back to the car, get my laptop out and do all the emails and all the things that I was behind on. So Angela's talking about juggling. You think of all these experiences where it's not glamorous, you're in the car, you're doing things whenever you can, but you've defined what success means for you and you're tryna do all the things that fit to what that criteria is. And it changes all the time, at another time, it's something else, it's much more about family or it's not about family at all. My husband then swapped and he was working part-time. And when the boys were teenagers, they related much better to him. So he did most of the home stuff and the cooking and stuff so I could concentrate on my career.

So you've gotta take a long-term view. It's not gonna be neat. Sheryl Sandberg in her book talks about women's careers being Jungle Gyms, where you move one thing and another thing and sideways and sometimes down and up and whatever. So it's higgledy piggledy to get up. It's not a straight line often. Sorry, I'm rambling, but this is one of my favourite topics, so.

PENELOPE ELLIS:  
No, I think so much of that resonates with me, Marcia. And I think about my own life currently. I do have little Dennis who is eight months old. I still feed him through the night and all of those things. And a lot of it also comes down to, I think, having conversations with my husband and working out who's going to do what so that he's not left at daycare, or that those different things do happen. And I also really think about considering my family first. It's not always that my family gets to come first when I hold different roles, but they have to be considered and their needs have to be met, if not by me, by someone else. And again, I draw on so much inspiration from my mum, and I think about if I'm working now it the moment, it relieves me financially to have more opportunity later in life to be able to spend time with them when they're at school. And I can't wait to be there cheering at the athletics carnival. I mean, as a principal, I hate the athletics carnival. It's so hard. I look at the organisation that goes into it.

But I think about, when I'm a parent, I can just stand there with my sign saying, go Florence, go Dennis, and cheer on the side, and the joy that will bring for them and for me. But something else that you mentioned was about imposter syndrome. And I know that I hear a lot about that from lots of my colleagues, lots of my friends, and Angela and Elizabeth, I'm interested on hearing on your thoughts on that and what we can do to support people who might feel like a bit of imposter in different roles.

ELIZABETH LABONE:  
Angela, do you wanna start with that?

ANGELA SINGH:  
Yeah, it's interesting, isn't it? I think in work we often wear masks, yeah? And so sometimes I'll go to a meeting, especially if it's the first meeting I've gone to, and I'll put the mask on. And whether you need to do that or not, I don't know. I mean, I think as I get more comfortable, I let my true self shine through, but... Number one, I've had the imposter syndrome, but sometimes I think work requires you to put on a mask for particular meetings. And if we wanna get something done, sometimes we have to play a particular role, and that's part of work. I think in helping address the imposter syndrome is, sometimes work is really hard, hey. And so if I'm coming across a new subject matter, I will do as much reading as possible. I will talk to as many other people as possible to get a bit of an understanding. So I think one of the things we need to say to ourselves is sometimes we feel a bit of imposter syndrome 'cause something is new to us, yeah? And so trying to get across that subject matter, that topic as quickly as possible is really important.

One of the things I always do whenever I feel like I've got that imposter syndrome and I'm in a meeting and it's my first one is I always try and talk first. You know, it's like when you're at uni in a tute, hey. And you try and get the first word in, 'cause number one, you hear your voice, so that automatically puts yourself at ease, yeah. But then you're also signalling to people that, you know what, I can contribute to this as well. So I think one of my strategies to deal with imposter syndrome is try and make a contribution early, but also make sure I've done the hard work that's required behind that meeting to get across that new subject matter as well. And I do know the best feeling in the world is being able to walk into a meeting, be confident and just absolutely nail it. But I think sometimes you can go in and out of that imposter syndrome, depending on the kind of meeting and the kind of role you're at, yeah.

PENELOPE ELLIS:  
Thanks, Angela. Elizabeth, did you have anything else to add in that space?

ELIZABETH LABONE:  
I'd agree with that, but I would also really emphasise the point that Angela has made about hard work, because sometimes, I think we talked about, oh, I'm lucky, or I've used this support work or whatever, but ultimately, it is hard work, and it is knowing your stuff and being reflective and thinking about what's going on and preparing and making sure everything is set up and in order, and that you have the background knowledge and that you have considered what is going on and listened to what is going on. So there is a very, very big element, I think, in leadership of doing the hard yards, knowing your stuff, being prepared, and often, perhaps we underestimate that, and that's why we tend to think, oh, should I really be here? Yes, you should be there, if you've done the work and you've got there, so.

PENELOPE ELLIS:  
Thanks, Elizabeth.

PENELOPE ELLIS:  
I'm interested around what we talked about, allies. I know in the audience, it's not just women, there are people in there of diverse ranges. Is there some advice for allies that any of you would give?

MARCIA DEVLIN:  
I'll go first while the others think. I would say to men, you hold the power currently, and if you back a woman in a meeting... So there's this thing that happens in meetings where women say something, it might have happened to you, Angie, if you have that technique of going first, right. And no one kind of hears, it's like they have this gender deafness. Julie Bishop talks about it used to happen to her when she was the only woman in that government, and they don't hear you. And so everyone ignores you and the meeting moves on. Later on, a bloke says exactly what Angela said first, everyone goes, Oh, what a great point, John. Oh yeah, oh yeah. And if a man stepped in at that point and said, oh yeah, that is a really good point, John, Angela made it earlier in the meeting. So it's great that you're agreeing with Angela. Just actually then the men can hear each other and there's no gender deafness with that sort of deeper voice or whatever it is about men's persona. So allies can... And it happened to me in a positive way at work, where a woman in the group will say, that's a great point Marcia made, and that Angela made earlier too.

So they're calling out what the women have said. It's a very simple little thing. But then everyone goes, well, what did Angela say? What did you say? I can't remember, but now a man said it. It must be important. Again, really annoying. Again, I don't agree with that, but that's the way the world is. So speaking up. And it doesn't have to be in public. I've got a friend who's talked about the fact that he goes to the boss and points out how good Penny is at doing X, Y, and Z, and we should give Penny opportunities. Because he's a bloke and he's gone to talk to the bloke who's in charge, Penny can get more opportunities. There's a million ways allies can help, but it's often about speaking up and advocating for people who are potentially being overlooked. That's given the others some time to think. So...

ELIZABETH LABONE:  
Sorry, my button wasn't working. Yes, I agree with that. I thought about this because I thought, what is it? What's the common trait, I suppose, in the people that I have had as allies, regardless of gender. And I think the common trait is that they're people who are fundamentally interested in the organisational goals or the social goals, and we are in a social endeavour in education and that that is privileged above all else. And that they will support and advocate for anyone who is championing those goals. So I think it's an interest in organisational goals, interest in social goals, interest in the broader goal that we are aiming for rather than interest in self-promotion or interest in where their next career move might be and how they can leverage that person to support that. So that's what I look for fundamentally, and I think as a leader, also as a leader in an organisation, that's the culture that I hope that I promote, that we're here for the goals of the organisation, for the broader common good goals.

And what are we all doing in terms of keeping our focus on that? And I think career trajectory comes naturally for those who do do the hard work and who do keep that focus.

PENELOPE ELLIS:  
Thanks, Elizabeth. Angela, is there anything else you'd like to add?

ANGELA SINGH:  
I think I definitely agree with the points made earlier, backing people in at meetings, validating their comments is really important. And I think going back to one of Elizabeth's earlier points, pointing out opportunities to people as well. And pointing out people's traits can be a bit tricky depending on the relationship you've got with somebody. But often people don't see their own inherent skills, it takes somebody else to point it out. And so, by saying, Oh, I noticed you did this piece of project work really well. Just pointing that out to someone and saying, you should consider A, B and C, and helping plant that seed. So again, I think sometimes we're blinkered in that. I've often heard people say, it took somebody else to see something in me and point that out in order for me to take that next step. So, in terms of allyship, definitely point those opportunities out, point those traits out to people because they might not necessarily identify those skill sets and traits themselves.

And the other thing too is, in terms of flexible work, men need to give themselves permission (INAUDIBLE) for flexible work, because often that will have flow on benefits for their partners regardless of gender. And so, I think, if all people can take advantage of the policies that are already in place, that's gonna have benefits for all of us.

PENELOPE ELLIS:  
Yeah, great. I might just add my own reflection as well around perseverance and open mindedness. And I know some leaders that I've had recently who are in the audience is around empathy and asking me and checking in on what I need. So not making those judgements for people, but checking in about what supports you need and how things can be achieved, and not disregarding people because of a situation. So not saying, well, Penny can't come to Melbourne and do this course 'cause she's got an eight-month old, but rather saying, would you like to come? And what supports can I put in place to support you? I think for me, in terms of having allies, has been really, really important. Just lastly, before we finish up, Marcia, we might come to you, but our final question is around what reflections are there on the roles of schools and teachers in creating pathways for our future female leaders? I just think about lots of the people in the audience are about to go and face a bright-eyed bunch of students this morning, so what can we do to support those in our classrooms and those future leaders?

MARCIA DEVLIN:  
Oh, the teachers have so much power. It's just wonderful. So, I think, um, starting with leaders, that role modelling that was mentioned earlier, 'you can't be what you can't see', everyone knows that sort of saying. So having women in those leadership roles, when Julia Gillard finished her prime ministership and Kevin Rudd was the prime minister again, I read this thing online where a parent said to the child in the morning, "Oh, we've got a new prime minister." And the child said, "What's her name?" Because just assuming the child was three or four years old, there's always been a female prime minister. So that just actually being in the leadership roles and back yourself, go for them. You're not ready. No one's ever ready, but you get as ready as you can, and then you step up and you have that discomfort that Angela just talked about. And you can do it. Of course, you can do it. So being in the role, just that alone. And then it's what messages you give, talking about girls and women, and actually people of all genders as equals.

It's not boys do this, girls do that. Boys have short hair, girls have long hair. It's just people are people, kids are kids. We're all equal. And all those sort of subtle messages you give as a leader. I think teachers really... And of course, you must prioritise professional learning. And of course, you should come to the academy to do that because we have very high quality professional learning. I have to say that, don't I? But teachers are lifting each other up inside and outside the school. One of the objectives of the academy is to raise public awareness about how awesome educators are. That's not what the legislation says, but that's my colloquial interpretation. And teachers talking positively about their work and about the profession and helping each other inside and outside the school, and making sure there's no casual sexism or gendered comments that get left unsaid, and then not overreacting when things are said just very gently using all their skills as a teacher to make sure that those things don't go unchallenged, yeah.

So I think teachers know that, I don't want to be preaching to teachers about what to do, but there's just such enormous potential and opportunity, and being very mindful about not assuming girls will do certain types of careers and be in the nurturing and caring roles, and boys the same. And I think for leaders as well, I heard one leader talk about this one, school leader, how she deliberately put males into the caring roles in the school so that... It's usually, if there's a wellbeing role or wellbeing aspect to a role they put a female in 'cause most teachers are women, 76% or thereabouts, but deliberately putting men into those roles so that the kids in the school could see all genders can do all things. It's not that women do the caring and nurturing stuff and men do the academic and other more important things. It's that everybody does everything. So I think that's probably one thing.

PENELOPE ELLIS:  
Thanks, Marcia. Thank you to all of you for your thoughts and insights today. I think it's been great to hear about the different experiences you've had and the advice that you have for different people out there throughout Victoria and wider. But what I'd encourage the audience to do is to think about what your call to action is and what you want to do with the information that you've learnt with today. Please keep a lookout for further information for further 'Thought Series' events. So there'll be things coming out through the Academy alumni and also things on our website and social media. But we really do look forward to welcoming people to the Academy in the future. And we'll have this webinar up on the website in the coming week. So a big thank you. Go well and wishing everyone a strong path forward. Thanks, everyone.