

This is the first chapter of *Leader by Design* by
Colleen Callander.
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LEADER BY DESIGN

COLLEEN CALLANDER



WHAT PEOPLE SAY ABOUT COLLEEN CALLANDER

‘Col has a natural power to mesmerise a room with her voice. She is a true visionary. She has always empowered me and given me the autonomy to realise my creative ideas. She taught me to be open and honest and gave me the confidence to express my ideas with passion and conviction.’

Kerrie Nelson, Director and Founder, Gypsy River and Gypsy River House

‘Every now and again you meet and work with stand-out people. I’m talking about a great listener; an authentic, interested, laser-focused, clever, caring, giving (with a roll-up-your-sleeves and get-stuff-done attitude) person. That’s Colleen.’

Lisa Kingman, Managing Director, Social Good

‘Colleen is a dynamic, sophisticated and compassionate leader. Her tenacious and assertive approach in business is beautifully complemented by her attention to emotional detail, openness in communication, and appreciation of the essentiality of cultivating wellbeing in the corporate sphere. Colleen leads with elegance, generosity and grace.’

Meredith Gaston, author, artist, wellness coach and speaker

‘As one of Australia’s leading CEOs, and as a new ambassador for CEO Dare to Cure and the Children’s Cancer Institute, Colleen has passionately engaged with our organisation. She has made a real and significant philanthropic impact and helped raise vital research funds to ultimately find a cure for every child.’

Cameron Bayfield, Corporate Partnerships Manager,
Children’s Cancer Institute

‘When I met Colleen, I instantly felt connected to her spirit and likeable nature that oozes girl-next-door-meets-exciting-entrepreneur. What I love about Colleen is that she knows who she is and what she stands for. She’s inspiring and grounded and makes you want to learn more and more from her.’

Amanda Campbell, sports kinesiologist, multiple sclerosis
ambassador and mindset coach

‘Colleen is a true leader for our times: generous and purpose-driven. She inspires women to truly believe in themselves, to give hard stuff a go and to use their voice to strive for bigger things. She is kind and empathetic and leads with integrity and purpose.’

Olivia Ruello, CEO, Business Chicks

‘Colleen is one of the most influential and dynamic forces in the Australian fashion industry. Her unique ability to lead, have an impact and remain relevant in one of the most competitive industries is truly remarkable. She has empowered and led thousands of women over her dynamic career and is a phenomenal role model all women can learn from.’

Jess Thomas, Founder, Health Lab Australia

‘I started my career as a young adult in my early 20s and Colleen quickly became my mentor, the leader I looked up to and an amazing role model – not only for me but also for everyone around her. Colleen was the kind of leader I wanted to be. Colleen challenged me, empowered me and taught me the importance of believing in myself and staying true to my values.’

Cristiana Bronson, National Sales Manager, Sportsgirl

‘I have had the privilege of working with Colleen for many years as she has supported my charity. The kindness she has constantly shown has always stood out and made me feel welcome whenever I went to Sportsgirl. Her continuous support and generosity have been a cornerstone for our long relationship and I’ve always felt inspired after being in her presence.’

Melissa Azzopardi, National Partnerships Executive, Starlight Foundation

‘Colleen is an exceptional leader and a once-in-a-lifetime boss. Working alongside Colleen as her EA, I was reminded daily of all the possibilities available to me simply because she supported, inspired and believed in me. Actually, this wasn’t just a luxury afforded to her inner circle – she did this for all her team. I witnessed Colleen’s unique leadership throughout the years. Truth be told, I could have worked anywhere but I chose to stay, as it’s hard to accept the old way of business once you have been shown a new world of possibilities and been empowered to lead with kindness.’

Tennille Younger, former EA to the CEO, Sportsgirl

‘A forever-personal-friend who demonstrates constant fierce loyalty, compassion and incredible drive. Colleen is a woman who can empower anyone to strive to find the best version of themselves. She is extremely zealous about family and life balance, and her can-do-will-do attitude to life is infectious. She inspires through confidence and inclusivity of all.’

Debbie Talbot, Director, AND Communications

First published in 2021 by Major Street Publishing Pty Ltd
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia.

Printed book ISBN: 978-0-6489803-8-4
Ebook ISBN: 978-0-6489803-9-1

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All inquiries should be made to the publisher.

Cover design by Tess McCabe
Cover photograph by Susan Bradfield
Internal design by Production Works
Printed in Australia by Ovato, an Accredited ISO AS/NZS 14001:2004
Environmental Management System Printer.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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One

**THE DAY I (ALMOST)
THREW IT ALL AWAY**



Leadership is about
one life having an impact on
another in a positive way.

COLLEEN CALLANDER

As women and especially mothers, we often put others before ourselves. It can be subconscious – a natural inclination. For me, this took its toll and came at a great cost.

I'm sure you've felt that cost in your life at one time or another. But have you ever reached the point where you decided you're done? Enough is enough? This is it?

That moment came for me in 2007. I was the general manager of Sportsgirl; my usual role was head of retail operations, but I was covering the general manager for her maternity leave. I was the proverbial headless chicken.

To say I was 'busy' is an understatement. With three children – Macey was just two, Trent was nine and Jake was 10 – an average day was barely contained chaos. Trent had been just nine months old when I joined Sportsgirl; I was still breastfeeding, pumping milk twice a day in the office, and taking all of my breast pumping equipment with me on planes.

As my role evolved, so too did my busy lifestyle. It involved everything from raising small children to having days packed with meetings, appointments and leadership decisions. My mum was my main support person – without her, I actually couldn't have done it. She did the school runs for me and I always attempted to leave work on time so I could be home for bath time, meal time and family time.

Then, after everyone was asleep and the house had quietened down, I'd start shift two. I'd pick up my computer and work for a couple more hours; it wouldn't be unusual to see me mopping floors and making school lunches at midnight.

That's if I wasn't travelling – my job saw me trek all over Australia for various reasons.

On the weekends, I'd take the kids to sports and activities and, between all of this, I tried to spend time with my husband, and vaguely stitch together a social life on the weekends.

Did I mention that I lived in Geelong while I was doing all of this? I was commuting 90 minutes each way per day to get to Melbourne for work. Is it any wonder that I was feeling burnt out?!

Perhaps this crazy schedule sounds familiar to you. For me, it was all I had ever known. For eight years, way back when my second child was still in nappies, I had worked my way up the corporate ladder at Sportsgirl – moving from state manager to national manager to retail operations manager, before taking the role of acting GM.

I sometimes think of myself during this period as a Formula 1 race car – one that had not been refuelled or serviced, had its tyres changed or pulled into the pit stop in a very long time. I was a high performer but, boy, I was suffering.

I had just been going and going and going. I knew no boundaries and said ‘yes’ to everything, no matter how full my plate. I wanted to be the perfect wife, mother, friend, sister and daughter. I put everyone else’s needs before my own – and before my health.

No-one asked me to do all of this, mind you – it was just me. I have always been a people pleaser. My whole childhood was about pleasing my mum and dad and making them proud, and that flowed through to the way I lived my life. Making my boss proud... my kids proud... my husband proud... That’s all that mattered to me.

Until I couldn’t do it any longer.

THE TIPPING POINT

I was only 36 years old, but I was *utterly burnt out*.

I got home from work one night and as I walked through the door and saw my husband, the words tumbled out of my mouth. ‘I can’t do it anymore. I’m exhausted. I am burnt out – I’m done.’

This was very typical of my personality; I'm an 'all or nothing' kind of person, which is probably why I had reached burnout in the first place!

It's not that I had lost my passion – far from it. I absolutely loved my job and was so proud of what I'd been able to achieve in my career. I just didn't have anything left in the tank. I had hit a wall... any cliché you can think of, that's how I felt.

What I've come to learn in the years since is that my problem was a very common one among women.

I didn't realise it at the time, but I was totally neglecting myself and my own health in my quest to make everyone proud of me. I think this came from my mother; she was always a pleaser and put others' needs before her own. (She still does!)

So there I was, always the first to arrive and often the last to leave the office. (I was one of those people who thought the longer you worked the better – it showed commitment and drive. This was how I was brought up.)

I was also on a plane every second week and, because I wanted to be an inspiring leader, my door was always open for my team. In fact, I always put my team's needs before mine, too. Hence, my breaking point.

Back to that conversation with my husband.

'I'm done,' I repeated. 'I just don't want to do it anymore.'

I am so lucky that I have such a supportive husband. His immediate reply was, 'If you don't want to do it anymore, then don't. Nothing is worth your health.'

So, we sat there (me in a very emotional state) and discussed our plans. We could sell our home and move to our holiday house in Sorrento (we wouldn't be able to afford two homes), and take the boys out of private school and enrol them into the local public school. We would have to change our lifestyle, but it would be worth it to focus on my health and wellbeing and that of my family.

That's the thing about burnout or exhaustion; it doesn't just affect you, it affects everyone around you. You are tired, cranky, emotional and sometimes even irrational. Your loved ones don't get the best version of *you* when you're in this state.

Perhaps you have experienced burnout previously, are in the midst of it right now or are on the slippery slope towards it. I wish I knew then what I know now; I wish I'd known the signs that very quickly creep up on you when you're on that narrow, windy and bumpy road to burnout.

I also wish I'd understood the importance of self-care and self-preservation. This is why I want to share my experience and failures with you: because I'm passionate about helping other women recognise the signs of burnout before they reach the same dire point I did. I want to empower you to be comfortable with putting yourself first, and to live a life of self-care and self-love – because when we do this, we have so much more to give others.

After that emotional planning session with my husband I had a fitful night of sleep, and awoke the next day feeling exhausted and anxious – yet relieved. The relief was the most overpowering feeling, because for once, I felt like I was about to get off this train to Burnout Town.

As soon as I got to work, I made a beeline for my boss's office. I could barely get the words out fast enough.

'I am letting you know what I am resigning,' I said. 'I'm burnt out, exhausted and my health is suffering. I quit.'

Oh, sweet relief.

I knew that once I said it out loud I would feel like a huge sandbag had been lifted off my shoulders – and it did. I felt like I could *breathe* again.

For a moment, at least.

Burnout is
a sign that
something needs
to change.

SARAH FORGRAVE

A DOSE OF SELF KINDNESS

You see, my boss at the time didn't see this coming. He was shocked I wanted to walk, and didn't want to accept my resignation!

'Col, what can we do?' he said to me. 'We don't want you to resign. You are such an asset to the company. There has to be another way...'

As it turns out, I didn't end up walking out that day. Over the coming weeks, we sat down together and had lots of discussions about my unsustainable working hours, my lack of home/life boundaries and how utterly exhausted I was – again, all things I had put on myself.

'What will it take for you to feel refreshed and refuelled?' he asked. 'Eight weeks off? Ten weeks? We can work this out, we don't want you to leave.'

In the end, I took three and a half months off. I used that time to refuel my tank – I put the Formula 1 race car in for a well-overdue service of self-care and kindness.

Not only did I work on my emotional and physical wellbeing during this break, but I also knew I needed to make some significant changes in my life so that I would never end up back in that same place, ever again. This was the best lesson ever in self-care. Realising I couldn't help others unless I helped myself first was a total game changer.

It's not your job to like me, it's mine.

BYRON KATIE

I returned to the office in February 2008 after three and a half months of rest, recharging and support from a life coach. I had never felt better. With my tank now full and strategies in place to live my best life (without burnout!), I was ready to tackle anything.



When I look back on this period, I realise that if it wasn't for the kindness, empathy and strategic thinking of my bosses at the time, I might be living a very different life right now.

I would not have had the opportunity to work my way up the corporate ladder and, more importantly, I would not have been able to inspire, impact and influence so many people through my leadership journey.

My own experiences have shown me that we need to empower and inspire women to lead in their own lives – both at work and personally.

**We need to create a world where we lead
with kindness, humility and self-awareness –
a world that puts *people* at the heart
of everything we do.**

All of which has led me to write this book. My goal is to inspire women to step up, have a voice, live with purpose, become the leaders they want to be, change the rules, live with confidence and create cultures that inspire and empower. I want them to embrace their superpowers. I also hope this book inspires organisations to embrace a new era of leadership – one based in kindness, trust and authenticity, and that encourages more women to take the helm.

step up

live with

purpose

change the rules

inspire &
empower

live with
confidence

speak up

embrace your
superpowers

A worldwide epidemic

Burnout costs billions of dollars every year in healthcare costs. It endangers the health of millions. It's perhaps no surprise to learn that burnout affects more women than men. Research shows that 23 per cent of employees feel burnout often, and 44 per cent feel burnout sometimes. Burnout often leads to disengaged employees, who cost their employers 34 per cent of their annual salary as a result. It's also responsible for a significant amount of employee turnover – between 20 and 50 per cent or more, depending on the organisation.

Signs of burnout show up in many different ways, and we need to recognise these warning bells before we get to a point where burnout takes over. Do any of these ring true for you?

- Chronic exhaustion
- Concentration and memory problems
- Constant fatigue
- Difficulty 'switching off'
- Inability to make decisions
- Irritability and lack of patience
- Lack of energy
- Reduced performance
- Sleep disorders or insomnia
- Trouble focusing on the task at hand

If you are nodding along as you read this, flick to chapter 7 *now!* It's where I share the strategies and solutions I personally used (and that I share with my mentoring clients) to get myself out of this funk.

A MISSION TO ENGAGE, EMPOWER AND INSPIRE

I eventually became the CEO of Sussan for six years, and then CEO of Sportsgirl for the next seven years, until I stepped out at the beginning of 2020. After 30 years in retail and an amazing 20 years with the Sussan Group, it was time for me to make a change and write the next chapter of my life.

I initially left to have a break and pursue my passion projects: supporting and mentoring women, writing this book, travelling and doing some charity work. Funnily enough, the break didn't actually happen – I've been so busy! But I've been busy in a *great* way: so many new doors have opened and I have so many exciting projects on the go.

As a CEO, my mission was to engage, empower, inspire and enable people to bring their best selves to work each day. Now, in this next chapter of my life, my mission is the same! I want to engage, empower and inspire as many people as I can, one beautiful human at a time.

As leaders, it's our job to create cultures that allow people to work at their natural best – and, in turn, help our organisations to grow and thrive.

We need to create a world of amazing female role models who embrace self-confidence and self-care. We need to foster humility, compassion and collaboration. We need to understand our core values in order to lead with authenticity, and create workplaces that align with these values.

This book is part autobiography – I share my life journey, including how my upbringing shaped the woman and leader I am today. But it's also packed with tips, advice, insights and guidance relevant to all women – whether you're climbing the corporate ladder, an entrepreneur, a volunteer, a professional athlete, working in the family business or holding down a casual job while raising a family.

Regardless of your current role and situation, I want to empower you to lead in your own life.

You don't
build a business
- you build people -
and then people
build the business.

ZIG ZIGLAR

We all need to play a part in this future world – and this is why we need to embrace female leadership. Only 17.1 per cent of CEO roles in Australia are held by women. This is a number that, in my view, is far too low.

**Less than 20 per cent of CEO roles
in Australia are held by women.**

Growing up and in the early days of my career, I looked up to and admired people with titles, levels of authority, rank and positions of power, labelling them leaders. What I learnt over time in both life and business is that these trappings do not automatically qualify a person for leadership. Leadership starts with the person. You don't even need a title to be a leader. Every day we have the ability to lead in our own lives, through every action, interaction, reaction and decision we make. We all have the ability to become the leader we always wanted to be, and the leader we always wanted to follow.

From a young age, I was always intrigued with the way people behaved, both good and bad. What made people treat others with kindness and respect? What made people step all over others for their own gain? What made some people create environments of fear, and others environments of collaboration? Why were some people caring and others cruel? Why were some generous and others greedy?

Looking back, I now know that I was shaping myself into the leader I wanted to be *by observation*. I listened, I learned, I asked questions and I made mental notes.

Without knowing it, I was becoming a **leader by design**.

**We all have the ability to become a
leader by design in business and in life.**

PEOPLE BEFORE PROFIT

During my 13 years as CEO of two of Australia's most recognised women's fashion brands, I have led with purpose, stayed true to my values, inspired and empowered women to believe in themselves, encouraged and nurtured, and created a culture of care that has allowed people to shine.

It saddens me that in today's world the majority of people go to work each day uninspired! I want to change that by sharing both *why* and *how* organisations can change the way they lead – by embracing a new era of leadership, and by encouraging more female leaders to have the confidence to step up and have a voice.

Can you imagine a world where people get up every day feeling valued, inspired, empowered and fulfilled? In 2020, Gallup reported that only 34 per cent of people in the US (and only 15 per cent worldwide) are engaged with their jobs.

This is because so many organisations today play the short game – putting profits before people. Think mass lay-offs to balance the books, increased market value and shareholder returns, all focused on short-term gains.

What would happen if we changed the emphasis from **profit** to **people, purpose** and **passion**? To me, these characteristics are the foundations for creating organisations that will not only survive but also thrive.

People with purpose and passion = profit.

I am a leader who has played the long game – people before profit. That does not mean profit is not important; of course it is. I would not have been a successful CEO for many years if I thought running a profitable and sustainable business was not highly important. But I believe if you look after your people, the profits will follow.

As a leader, I have always focused on creating winning teams and environments where people felt inspired and empowered, and love to come to work. I nurtured a culture of care, developed and retained talent and inspired female leaders for the future.

I want this book to be an inspiration to women (as well as men) of all generations. I want to encourage women globally to believe in themselves and their abilities, share their voices, lead with kindness, take action and bring equality into boardrooms, organisations and communities – and even into their homes.

I want all women to believe in the power within. It is possible to become the leader you always wanted to have, and the leader you always wanted to be, in business and in life.

So let's get started!