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[60. Career change: Switching sectors, industries, and countries - Karen James shares her story and tips](#)

- Renata: Karen James is the CEO of Business for Development, an NGO based in Australia, operating globally and helping communities around the world grow businesses and be entrepreneurial using agriculture as their main source of income. Before being a CEO, Karen spent many years in the corporate sector, over three decades, and her last employment in the corporate sector was with the Commonwealth bank. She's also a consultant and spent many years helping other organizations deliver products and services on purpose. She describes herself as a purpose expert, and I would have to agree a hundred percent with her. Her ability to stay focused on purpose has allowed her to transition from sector to sector.
- Renata: She started her career as an engineer, she then worked in I.T., and she did a master's in Environmental studies. She then moved to leadership roles and became very customer-centric in the way that she implemented large enterprise-wide projects for the Commonwealth bank. And that's when I met her. We've been connected ever since. She's a very charismatic, extroverted leader that really supports everybody around her and is incredibly entrepreneurial and business-focused, but also very warm and caring in her nature. So I believe that all of those qualities have enabled her to build this beautiful career across the globe and across different sectors. And I wanted her to share that with the listeners today.
- Renata: What I think is important to realize is, even though Karen is now a very senior executive, she wasn't, and everybody listening to this podcast can take a leaf off her book and understand that what she has done can inspire and support your own personal career development. She's also an extrovert, and we address that as part of the questions that I've asked her during the podcast. And you may not be an extrovert, but I know that Karen has worked with introverts. She supports introverts. And I asked her to give some advice for those who don't find it as easy as she has found to let people know you know what her purpose is, what she is interested in so that the opportunities come knocking at her door rather than the other way around.
- Renata: And you can do that as an introvert or as an extrovert. So addressing all of this at the beginning, I think it is important for you to have a great listen, and I love listening to stories, and this is a great story that starts in New Jersey, ends up in Melbourne, Australia. She's now based in Sydney because there's a COVID lockdown, and she's still in Sydney, and I suppose that she is between Sydney and Melbourne for her work at the NGO and the work that she does consulting as well. So without further ado, enjoy this chat with Karen. This is our episode just before Christmas; enjoy your festive season. And if you're preparing your festivities, whatever it is that you're celebrating, I hope that you're listening to this and wrapping up your gifts and organizing your dinner parties or your holidays away, or just staying like I am in the house, locked-down mode. It's also nice and warm and cozy. Bye for now.
- Karen: Hello.
- Renata: Hello.
- Karen: How are you? I'm just looking at my hair.

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- Renata: It's always like that. When people come on zoom, it's like, ooh, get surprised with their own selves and their faces and how the camera is.
- Karen: I know, I know. And so let's crack-in.
- Renata: Let's crack in, let's crack-in. But before we start with the questions that I sent you, because I know you probably have prepared, I want to talk a little bit about COVID because you are now a CEO of an organization and you're working remotely. How are you doing it? How is it to manage and lead from a distance?
- Karen: I guess the first thing is, there's managing from a distance, and then there's managing from a distance when people have been in lockdown, like everyone experienced in Melbourne. And I think they're very different. So I think managing from a distance, I've been doing that my whole career, you know, I was running service businesses out of the Asia Pacific and things like that, so I'm used to running things from a distance, and I don't have any problem with that. We were using zoom and video before COVID, and we're very comfortable doing that, but managing people in lockdown is difficult because everyone is tired and stressed, and it's like a whole new thing. And that was, you know, you can do as many things as you like, you know, we did a lot of fun things.
- Karen: We sent, you know, I sent gifts, and we did lots of different things. We had, you know, a day where everybody gets online, buys their kids gifts, you know, and we had carer's days, and we had locked down a long weekend when Melbourne was released, we did all sorts of fun things, but, you know, the strain of that was challenging. And my job is to look after people, but I also have to look after keeping the organization going as well. And it was, yeah. And you just got always to be trying to walk in everyone else's shoes. You know, I've been in Sydney, not by design really, it was accidental. I drove back to drop my daughters back in Sydney because we had like a workation in Melbourne. And then the numbers of COVID started to go up, and I thought, 'well, I'll just wait, I'm seeing a client here anyway.' And I had no intention of being here for that long. I didn't even barely pack any clothes. Like everything I've worn since June, I've had to pretty much, you know, like a lot of new things, my new top. And so it's been like, yeah, it's...
- Renata: I ask this because so many senior executives are in between jobs, and when they go back to work, it will be different. It will be different for them. So it's important for them to have this intelligence of somebody who has been doing it whilst they are looking for work so that they come back into the workforce and hit the ground running.
- Karen: And it's such a good distinction because it will be different because a lot of people are not interested in going back to the office. And a lot of people have been like, you know, I can operate even when I'm away. Introverts are terrified because they've really enjoyed this. And you've got to consider this a hundred percent, and extroverts - how do you keep them focused? Because once they're let out, they're going to be like...you know?

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- Renata: My husband was climbing the walls. There was a point that I was worried for him that he wasn't going to be able to cope anymore.
- Karen: Yeah. I had a small family Thanksgiving here in Sydney on the weekend.
- Renata: Oh yes! Happy Thanksgiving, by the way.
- Karen: Yeah, thanks. And so I had a lot of social interaction, and Monday work was very difficult for me because what I needed as an extrovert was to go into the office and be like, 'how's everyone going? Let's get a coffee and start the week'. And I was in my daughter's bedroom with half-strength coffee behind me. And I found Monday really difficult. I had to manage myself, and I had to let everybody know that I was struggling, and I had to give them the background why and say, 'this is why I also have a friend who's in the hospital that was very sick.' I had to tell everybody to be transparent because otherwise, they were vibing off me that I was like, not happy to be at work on a Monday when it was the reverse. What I really wanted to be was at work on Monday. And I'm still here in the half-strength coffee room.
- Renata: So let's talk about your career and how you got to where you are today. I love to hear career stories, and I know a little bit about yours, but my listeners don't. So, where do you want to start? I mean, clearly, you are an American in Australia, so that's a story.
- Karen: Yeah. Well, I think it's always good to start from the beginning. And one of the things that getting older gives you is the ability to look back and almost look at your life as a timeline, and look at those milestones that made you go in a different direction and kind of reflect on what was it that catalyzed that change or that decision? Was it accidental? Was it circumstantial? Was it intentional? And I think that that's been one of probably the most fascinating things that I've been able to do in my fifties, you get that cool lens back. And so, I originally studied engineering with the sole purpose to be able to support my mother financially. That was it. And I knew I was good in math and science, and I liked fixing things. Nobody had ever gone to uni in my family. I was a bit on my own making them. I'm thinking, I talked to a guidance counselor, and he's like, maybe you should go into engineering. I'm like, that sounds like a good idea.
- Karen: And so, that was that. What I discovered was being in a lab and being in an engineering environment wasn't really for my personality. But what I really liked was working with customers and solving their problems. I became very customer-centric, and I had a great opportunity at a very young age, at 23, to work overseas in England. And at the time like people do that all the time now. But at the time, this girl from New Jersey whose parents never went to uni being able to work overseas. It was like, wow, what an experience. And that opportunity was catalyzed by my decision to leave the organization I was working for because I worked for a very sexist boss.
- Karen: And I just got to the point where I'm like, I'll do my time, so to speak, but then I'm moving on. And I had been offered a role in Manhattan working for a company there at a very good salary, which is something that, you know, it's like, that's what in the

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eighties, it's that's what you dreamed of, you know, working in Manhattan. And so I'm a natural networker. I don't do that for gain or any purpose. I just like, particularly working with women.

Renata: You're the best out there that I know of.

Karen: It's really because I like to help women. It's not for any other reason. So I was 21, and I joined this company, and it was all men, and I met two women. One was 30, and one was 40. I never thought about their titles, and we decided to have drinks once a month, you know? And so I went for drinks and said, oh, I'm leaving, and this is why. And they're like, 'Oh, we don't want to lose you.' I'm like, 'it's too late. I've signed the contract'. And Gloria, who was the head of marketing, couldn't believe there were nude pictures in the factory. And you know that my boss had a poster of Lonnie Anderson on the back of his door, and the next day all hell broke loose. And the vice president was taking things down worldwide, posters down, coffee mugs out, all because of me. And I said it's too late, guys. I'm over the line. I've got a new offer. And they're like; we don't want to lose you. And I wasn't lodging a complaint or anything. You know, True Kelton, who ironically is in Australia, interviewed me and said, 'would you want to come work in England?'

Karen: And I was like, well, you know, when does that get to happen? And my mom's like, 'you can always come back, go for it.' And it was a big decision. And on paper, it looked like the wrong decision because the salary was much lower. It was a third of the salary of the Manhattan job. A third. And I took it because I decided the opportunity was bigger than the financial change. And that was probably one of the most important career decisions I've ever made. You know? And we had these really incredible roles. We were in the international division for the whole company. We were third level engineering. We fixed the problems no one else could fix, and we closed the deals internationally. We worked with all the channel partners, and we got to travel, and it was unbelievable.

Karen: And then my visa was running out, and Drew moved to Australia. And he asked me to come to do some work here and then ended up offering me a role because we want a really big network deal for the Bureau of Meteorology and DEFAT. And the irony of it is that the product we were selling was the one that none of the guys wanted. So as a female and she often got the dregs, and it was packaged switching, you know, and everybody was like, nobody wants to do that. And so it was my product range, and it was a real doubt of a product, you'd look at the system, and it would just reset, and the customer would be like, did that just reset, you'd be like, 'not sure, let me have a look.' It would be like the whole zoom crashes and comes back up again.

Karen: And so, you just had this happening all the time. So, I think sometimes you just got to trust. And I did that, and then I studied a master's in Environmental Engineering while I was doing that role because I realized that I didn't really want to be in I.T. I completed that at the University of Sydney and then pivoted into leadership in I.T. and thought that would be a nice transition, and had a wonderful opportunity to work for an I.T. start-up in the US that was Cisco's competitor. And that ended up

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being merged with another company. And then, Cisco was clearly winning that war, and I was headhunted by a company called Contact. And I was interested in that role for a lot of personal reasons.

Karen: It was a real family company. It was started by the Shane family, and I needed to be with family people, and not people that maybe weren't family people, if you know what I mean. I was in the middle of a divorce, I had two young babies, and I needed to be around people that cared about that. And I was surrounded by a lot of people that were a bit wild. And so that was a very important decision. And that was a wonderful career change. And so I became very client-centric, and you make decisions at different times. You know, I made that change, I had a one-year-old, three-year-old, my ex-husband moved overseas, I'm an immigrant changing from I.T. was not a good decision for me. And I made decisions for my daughters, and I don't regret that at all.

Karen: And we grew that business from 9 million to a hundred million dollars. Like it was a wonderful seven years. And the CEO at the time, Steve Nola, helped me incredibly when my mom was dying of cancer. And, you know, I made a commitment to get that business to 100 million as part of my commitment to them as that thank you for that very challenging time that they supported me to be the carer for my mom and gave me a three-month sabbatical and paid me and let me pay them back. I worked for leaders, and I'll never forget that period because I couldn't have had better leadership and support.

Renata: I completely agree. And I think that it's very important for us to go back and thank people that have helped us in our careers. And I had had similar occasions where I was so grateful to be working for great people that supported me when I needed support. Like you, you know, it's so good, and it makes a complete difference in your lifestyle and your wellbeing if you can count on your colleagues and your leaders.

Karen: Oh, a hundred percent, a hundred percent. You know, equality happens for everybody when leaders make great decisions. And so, I ended up calling a client to just have a chat about careers, and they ended up offering me a role, another great leader, Michael Bloomfield, who was one of the key founders of COMSEC. And I worked with him, and I went to Combank because he was looking for someone to help him drive change, drive a better customer service culture. And from that grew an opportunity to do a lot of community programs, again another great leader, Simon [inaudible], and he and Michael gave me the opportunity to do my job, which was strategy ops, hardcore banking execution, while at the same time I had the opportunity to do community-based programs. We founded Women in Focus from that.

Karen: We founded indigenous microfinance. We had a portfolio of over 40 clients, and we did a huge amount for not-for-profits, and that was a wonderful period. I always call it my accidental banking years because I made a commitment. I always commit that if somebody says, will you do this? I say, yep. And I tell them what I'll commit to. And I never go back on that. So I committed to Michael and B that had stayed for three years, and a lot happened in those three years. And he ended up leaving, and Simon

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came in, and I said, Simon, I'll commit till you're on board. And then, you know, I stayed for seven years because the work we did with the hunger project to drive cultural change in the business banking division was incredible. And that program lasted for seven years, it outlasted Simon, it outlasted me as the Women in Focus and, when you build stuff, and you walk away, and it goes without saying. You know it was something that was meant to last.

Renata: That legacy is so great to see, isn't it? When you walk away from a job, and you leave a legacy behind that remains, and also that invites you back because that's how we met. We met when I was the CEO of a foundation. It was very well supported by the Commonwealth Bank, and our key partner there was Kelly by Rosemary. And I think my chair at the time and Kelly were very close because of that partnership that we had with the CBA for the foundation, and Jillian, my chair, called and said, I think the CBA will invite you for something. You have to say, yes, whatever. I don't know exactly what it is, but you have to say yes. And then my CBA contact in Melbourne said, oh, we are inviting you to come to this conference up in Queensland.

Renata: I think it was new. It was new. So the first time wasn't it that I went and I had no idea what was coming. I remember stopping in Brisbane along the way and having a catch-up with a few friends from DEFAC. I'm going for this weekend away, and I have no idea what to expect. And it really transformed my life. It was a big milestone for me.

Karen: Oh, it makes me really happy.

Renata: And I told you, I think the next time I attended, because you know, it's a blessing to go twice, it's really not easy. I reached out to you, and I thanked you.

Karen: Yes, I remember it.

Renata: Yeah. We hadn't met the first time because there are hundreds of women, and it's such an overwhelming feeling, and it's so much to absorb. I felt like a sponge. I felt like I was a dry sponge and I came back home nurtured, and you know, yeah. So cool. And then the next time I came, I came to you and said, I just love this thing for doing this. Thanks for your book. Thanks for everything.

Karen: Oh, it's a pleasure. It makes me very happy to see the longevity of the relationships and connections that were inspired by Women in Focus, and Kelly catalyzed it as well. She supported it through the entire time at Commbank. And that was really critical.

Renata: For those listening. She's now the CEO at Optus, by the way.

Karen: That's right. That's right. And it started as a product idea. It moved to the community, and that was a very important shift because, I think the reason why it became a community, and so many women have retained such strong connections and such positive brand recognition of Combank at that time, and now is because it wasn't about selling superannuation. It was about connecting people and inspiring

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them and informing them, and leveraging the resources of the bank to offer something to the community.

Renata: Can I ask you a question about all of these transitions that you've made? What do you think were your key strengths that allowed you to make all of those sector transitions and professional big changes really to move from engineering, to I.T., and sectors, a master in environmental science, and then move to more of a customer center centric leadership role in a bank. What was the golden thread that linked everything? This is important in the context of a lot of senior leaders and people changing sectors at the moment, right?

Karen: Yeah. I've got to finish the story because the answer comes from the end. So I decided that it's easy to stay at a place like Combank and it's comfortable. It's very comfortable. I mean, I don't know if it's still comfortable, but it's comfortable. And it was important for me to leave and just take some time to think about what to do next. And so I took what I described as my late mat leave and, three months clear off. And that was when my youngest daughter was gone through HSC, and that was a smart decision and wrote my book at that time very quickly. And then really...Oh, thank you. And then, I ran my own business, which was very challenging and very rewarding.

Karen: And now I'm the CEO of a non-for-profit called Business for Development. I got a spruik where I'm at. And Business for Development is actually the hardest work I've done because we deliver programs on the ground, and we're in the middle of a pandemic. And we're trying to get 30,000 vines from Gorokan to the top of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. That's what we achieved over the weekend planted.

Renata: Oh my goodness.

Karen: And it's like, you know, and so I think you've got to back yourself, you know, you've got to believe in yourself, and you've got to have that courage to step off the platform into the abyss. And it may seem like that's easy, but it's not for me, you know, because I work with seven entrepreneurs and have been for a few years now.

Karen: And one of them is Melissa Brown, and she is an author and a public speaker, and she runs a couple of her businesses. And she asked me what my money story was. And I never thought about this like, what are you talking about my money story? And she asked me questions like, you are like, you know, what are the stories? And just this conversation has had such a profound impact on my career choice because my mom used to say, you've got to make sure you don't end up in the poor house. And when Melissa was asking me about my money story, I was like, where is the poor house? Like is it a place you knock on the door, let me in, I'm coming to join the poor house. And it is ingrained in my head, this concept of the poor house. And I constantly battle with the fear of ending up in the poor house, but also, it invokes a scarcity mindset.

Karen: Right. We had a board meeting yesterday, and all I kept saying to myself was, 'don't think about scarcity mindset. Don't think we don't have enough resources to do

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this'. You've got to battle the mindsets that are implanted. And so it's about saying, okay, I know this is in the way of me stepping off this platform or this ledge, but I'm going to do it anyway. Michael Bloomfield said to me once, one of the reasons why I hired you, KJ is because you are prepared to take great personal risks. And I've always done that for my customers, right? So if my customer had a problem, I would put my job on the line to solve that problem for them. And part of changing careers is about taking personal risk, and it's going to rub up. Like, some people are just amazing at it. You know you look at entrepreneurs, they're like incredible. They are the bravest people, but I'm sure they have stuff they're battling as well. You just don't see it. So I think,

Renata: Do you think that you fought against this concept of this scarcity house because leaving Combank as an example is a very risky move if you were really following your mother's advice?

Karen: Oh, I would have never left. One of the guys that I worked with he's like, 'KJ, you've been running a marathon as a single mom, and you've got 4K left to go, don't leave the bank'. He's like, stay. I said it's time for a change. I mean, you know, three years became seven and, you know, so yeah.

Renata: Do you think what drives your change is a sense that you have more to give and you have more to share, and you get, I wouldn't say bored because I can't think of you ever bored, you need more challenge for your personal development?

Karen: So what was happening was, I was thinking, 'I'm not doing enough, that things that I believe are important, I'm not doing enough.' I'm not drinking my own champagne. I've been advised 'eating my own dog food' isn't a good expression by 150 women at a conference. Drinking my own champagne and living my life on purpose. So I would be at the end of my day, thinking, 'what have I really done for the environment? And so, I had to get on purpose, and I had a wonderful opportunity to do that at Commbank. But what ended up happening was my role in strategy and ops got bigger. And my time in my community programs got smaller. And one of my responsibilities was the SAP migration for corporate financial services. You know, it's a \$1.8 billion profit to the bottom line.

Karen: And I had to lead that, and, you know, real-time banking was not an easy scope of work. And that took a lot of my time. So I was spending less time in things like the community, business finance, and Women in Focus, and a lot of time making sure that the ERP system integration was working. And so, it was just time for me to step off, but it was absolutely catalyzed by my commitment to live life on purpose. And I've been working extremely hard through COVID, very hard. I think this is one of the hardest times I've worked since probably, and I don't know, maybe writing the book. And what catalyzes me is the work we're doing, because Business for development, I can wake up every morning and be like, 'okay, I know this is good work.'

Karen: I know when I received the photos over the weekend from our lead in Papua New Guinea, Noel Kumon, it made my day. It was, you know, just to see 30,000 vines being planted and 2000 kilos of tubers being planted is incredible. And you can't underestimate the joy that brings, and that wasn't easy. Just a side note, this is Noel.

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I'll send you these pictures. We loaded everything on the truck. And I don't know if you know about Papua New Guinea, but the terrain is insane. And he had to get from Goroka to the top of the Highlands, and he couldn't get the truck up the Hill, and he had to unload the truck and find two more trucks and start all over again.

Renata: I can imagine it's like some of the parts where my father was brought up in the Amazon, you know, like really rough terrain. There's a story in the Amazon of a train track that they try to build for like two decades, and they would build it, and it would disappear. The rain, you know, just spent a week without building it. And then things will just grow over it.

Karen: Yeah, yeah, same thing.

Renata: But tell me this, with all of these career changes, sector changes, country changes, looking back, what have you learned that you can impart for others that are now considering making these moves? Would you do anything differently, or was something that you've done that really surprised you, that you think is good advice for somebody that's now considering a sector change, for example?

Karen: Yeah. Yeah. I think you have to be prepared to do work outside of your day job to make these changes, right? Like people say, 'Oh, how did that happen?' You know, B for D is a perfect example. Right? So I was running my own business, and I was invited to participate in a comedy debate, a comedic debate to launch Muhammad Yunus' latest book, 'A world of three zeros.' Right. And everyone who knew me was like, 'you've never done that.' I'm like, 'I know, but my strategy is to say yes, it's my own business. I'm saying yes to everything'. And we did this with Kat Dunn, who was running the Grameen foundation at the time. And then Professor Muhammad Yunus invited us to do it in India.

Renata: Just for the listeners, I'm going to put the link below so that you know he's a micro-financing guru and, you know, well-known. I'll put a link below.

Karen: Yeah. Yeah. And like, 'when does that happen?' So he invites me to go to India. And it was like, 'are you going to go? Are you really going to do that?' And it was all funded out of my own money, you know? I mean, he didn't fund us. It's a not for profit, you know? And so it costs a lot of money. Like, you know, it was two weeks out of my own business, plus airfare, plus hotel. I don't know what that all adds up to, but it was not trivial. And it's hands down the best decision I ever made because, you know, I shared a room with Cat, and we're like, 'Oh, what do you think?' And I'm like, 'you know, I really miss leadership.' And she sent me the link to B for D and said, 'Oh, this sounds like the kind of thing you would be interested in.' And it was exactly what I was interested in. And I just gave this advice to my daughter's friend, she's in a role she doesn't like, and I said, 'well, you got to do things that you like to do outside of what you're currently doing, and do that outside of it, and be prepared to give.

Renata: And to let people know. I remember you had told me that you were missing leadership. I came back to Melbourne from wherever we were talking about this, and I kept you top of mind. If you tell people that you are ready for a change and

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that you're looking for a role, then people know of you, and they will come to you with ideas and opportunities.

Karen: Yep. And get involved in things. That sounds easy, but you just got to get started. And,

Renata: Did I introduce you to some head-hunters? I did. I came down to Melbourne. And I thought, 'Oh, I think she needs to meet, you know, X, Y, and Zed.' And I emailed you.

Karen: And I think, right after that, I went to India. Yeah. I think that was the timing,

Renata: I know because you told me it was out of your own pocket. Yeah. And I'm like, 'ok, that's a big expense.

Karen: You know I was running a lean business at the time. And the other thing I adopted when I started my own business, which I wish I would have started earlier is, I imagined every day, if there was a mud field and that I would just throw seeds into the mud field and I'd throw a hundred seeds out, and maybe one would grow. And I just gave this advice to someone who's changing their career. I caught up with her for a 7:00 AM coffee this week, and we gave each other advice, and I said, 'just throw one seed out a day, just do one thing to move yourself to where you want to be going.' And by setting yourself that kind of goal, you actually end up doing that. So when I was running my business, if I were delivering services for a client, I would still find time somewhere in the day to throw those seeds out.

Renata: Karen, you were applying for a job in a not-for-profit, you had worked bridging the divide between a bank and foundations and not-for-profits when you were at the Commonwealth Bank, but you had never worked in the nonprofit world. How did you interview for those roles? And I mean, was there an interview, as a formal interview process, or were you more ahead?

Karen: Oh yes.

Renata: I can imagine because many people in the corporate sector at all levels are interested in jumping ship to the non-profit, and it is a different ball game as you know now, it's very lean, it's very hands-on, it's very vertical, you're leading, but you're also doing, you're steering the ship, and you're rowing, and it can be exhausting.

Karen: It's a great way of describing it.

Renata: Exactly. And for that reason, the interview process is very thorough. So when I was interviewed for the John Monash Foundation, it took almost a year for them to make up their minds. And it's always very thorough. And I can imagine yours was too. How do you think you were able to convince them that somebody coming from a large listed, really big organization would be able and suitable to run a Business for Development?

Karen: The first thing was, I wanted the role like I wanted this role, and I think that's important because it determines how you interview. There was nothing...

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- Renata: Your body language, what comes out of your mouth, the way that you interact. Yeah.
- Karen: The preparation, the proactive actions, the follow-up calls, everything. And one of the things I haven't mentioned yet is, I think it's really important to have people in your corner in your personal life. Like, I have been very lucky that I have very good friends. Like I have good friends and, like my best friend Vicky is like my person, you know, we talk almost every day and, having people in your corner, my friend Mazie is like me single, same age group, and we mentor each other for our careers. It's important to have people in your corner.
- Renata: Are they also corporate women?
- Karen: Vicky ran her own business, sold it to Ogilvy years ago, and has been doing not-for-profit pro bono work. And she is on the board of Micah. And so I don't think she ever called herself corporate, no. She's an entrepreneur. Mazie is corporate.
- Renata: What I think is important for professionals at all levels, whatever level they are in their careers, they're recent graduates, or they're senior, is that network of colleagues that have similar interests, their mindsets. And if they don't get a coach to support you until you build that network, for example, I have friends and colleagues and clients that they are the senior corporate exec, and their husband or wife has a retail shop, or is a beautician, or is a teacher, or is a tradie or a builder. So the two worlds, it's a beautiful yin yang, but when you're going through an interview process, it's quite hard for that to support you in the sense that it's completely different ways of interacting with your future employer or client or whatever.
- Karen: Yeah. You need experienced people. I've been very blessed that I've had an incredible mentor in Wendy McCarthy. I mean, I could not complete the podcast without mentioning Wendy. She's unbelievable. She's never given me any experience sharing or advice that hasn't been spot on. And ironically, I don't want to sound like I'm name dropping, but these people shared incredible ideas and thoughts with me, and they made a difference. And I think being able to find good people is really important. So I just coincidentally had dinner with Ronnie Khan the night before I flew to Melbourne for my last interview. And I shared with her my worries. And she's like, 'well, just call it at the start, call it.' And so at the start of the interview, the last interview, I called what I saw as the elephant in the room, with the board.
- Renata: You can't say, that's okay. I thought that it was something to do with your background because I think as a career coach, I often tell people that if there is something that you think that's playing in the selection panels mind about yourself, some people think it's their age, some people think it's their lack of experience in the background in the sector. Well, address it as part of your pitch.
- Karen: It wasn't about me. It was about what I thought they might be thinking. And it was perhaps unfair of me to think they may be thinking that right. It was presumptuous. So that was bold because if they weren't thinking that, then I could've come across

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as you know. But I raised it in a way where I was, you know, and I'm really glad I did it, really glad.

Renata: You should always do that. And come clean about whatever objections people may have about you.

Karen: Yeah, like I'm wondering if you were thinking... And if you are, let me explain why that's not going to be a challenge for me in this role. That's how I addressed it. I'm wondering if you are thinking, but I was [door knocking].

Renata: So we're back, we're back. She answered the knock on the door, and I was going to say, I'm going to add this page to the blog.

Karen: Oh, yes.

Renata: The one with the dip at the bottom page. I love this page so much, you know, the blind spots, the dip, and then it goes up after that after you recognize that you have those blind spots. You can then address them, and you hit rock bottom; that's your blind spot. That's, you know, I'm going to enable now you knowing it and addressing it. And that's what your network does for you as well, is have that perspective of looking at you from a different angle, identifying your strengths, identifying what you're good at, and identifying what you can do better.

Karen: Yeah. Literally. Literally asking people to be your cheerleader. I remember when Wiley offered.... My daughter, I won't name her, said, mom...because she liked me at Commbank, right? That was good for her. And I said, no, this is going to change. And she said, 'you don't have to do this.' And I'm like, 'well, if you're not going to believe me, leave the room.' And she just looked at me. I said, just shut the door behind you and leave the room until you're prepared to back me and believe in me. As a family, we do this little chant, 'I believe in you, I believe in you.' And we've applied for this grant at Business for Development. And it's the biggest grant we've ever applied for. And we've been shortlisted 186 to 22. And so I've got everybody in my tight circle saying, 'pick us, pick us.' And I'm like, 'go on say the chance for the grant.' 'Pick us, pick us!' And on the zoom calls with the team on teams, I'm like everybody, 'pick us! Pick us!', and they think I'm crazy, but it's about getting everybody in your corner and saying, 'yeah, I can see this happening.' You know? I mean, it doesn't always work. Right. You know you do a lot of things that don't work. I mean, I've done way more things that didn't work than did, but you got to do a lot of things.

Renata: And Karen, you are clearly an extrovert. You are so charismatic. You're like the sun when you're on stage, and you have this amazing network that supports you. But you know, and you work with people that are introverts and that have less of this ability to let people know about them and about what they do. I'm asking you this because I know you are a mentor and an advocate, and a supporter for many women, and I'm assuming not all of them are extroverts, right. What is your advice for professionals out there that are more of timid about putting themselves out there and taking those risks? They are willing, but they have less of that trait to position themselves and communicate well.

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Karen: I think when you look at it because you've experienced the Women in Focus conference, I mean everybody on the Women in Focus team has to be as extrovert as possible during that conference, that's their job, that's the job. There is no, 'I'm going to go back to my room.' It's like, no, you're going to come to the conference. We even had a role, and we rotated it. And at the end of the conference, everybody would be like, 'Oh, I can't wait to go home and bunker down and be in for two days.' And I'd be like, 'really? I could do another conference'. And so, the majority of the women in the Women in Focus team actually had quite introverted tendencies. And I think that introverts if you think of the definition, doesn't mean you can't go out and network.

Karen: It just means you draw your energy from when you are in your own space, and extroverts draw energy from other people. And it's really the definition, but we can all communicate and be with people and help each other. And so, if you redefine what networking is about, networking isn't about going out and being in a big crowd. It's about giving. When you think about networking is giving, I don't really like the word networking. I don't tend to use it. I don't even think about it personally. I just think we all have a responsibility to give to others. And if you just think of your relationship in your work and your personal life as giving, it's really easy no matter where you draw your energy from, because giving is giving. And that would be my recommendation because you need a two-day nap after those conferences where I was, like, ready to go to another.

Karen: I mean, the last major thing I did was emcee the Movers and Breakers Conference at Business Chicks in Broome on October 19. And we ended it with a song, and honestly, it has carried so many of us through COVID, and I popped into the Facebook chat to everybody, you know, 'I listened to our song over and over again when I'm having a bad day through COVID.' And everybody was like, 'so do I!' And I'd say, 80% of the people that go to Movers and Breakers are introverts, but they go, and they show up, and they leave on a higher plane than when they arrived. And you've only got to leave with one thing. Maybe it's the song at the end. Maybe it's, you know, the speakers are always incredible, maybe it's a friendship you didn't have before you start. And just join something, join anything, just do something. I think it all adds up, you know, I don't even know how I could have ever predicted that I would be emceeing, Movers and Breakers. I would have never predicted that. And that all just came out of me wanting to give back to women.

Renata: Karen, you probably know people in your network that are in between jobs this year.

Karen: Yes, a lot.

Renata: And we are launching this podcast just before Christmas. This podcast will be released on the 14th of December. And it's a strange time, Christmas, because it's supposed to be the happy season, but for those that are unemployed, it can be very stressful and anxious as well. I've been in that situation a couple of times, and it's both, you know, you're happy, and you're enjoying yourself, and then you have a quiet time, and you're worrying. Right. What is your advice? And as somebody who has so connected with the corporate sector with a not-for-profit, what do you

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foresee when you look at 2021, what do you see? Let's be optimistic and give people advice. Because I think you can, especially if we're listening in Australia, I think we're more optimistic than people overseas, right?

- Karen: Yeah. So Olivia Ruello, CEO of Business Chicks, proactively just sent me a book this year- 'Untamed' by Glennon Doyle. Right.
- Renata: Oh yes. Everybody's reading this book.
- Karen: I loved it. And Liv knows me so well, and she's like, 'get the girls to read it.' I loved it. And so I follow her now. Right. I'm kind of obsessed with her. And she's got this motto, 'We can do hard things.' So I'm optimistic. I'm a naturally optimistic person, but I think it's really important to be pragmatic because it drives our decisions. I think next year's going to be hard. I think it's going to be hard. So, you know, we can do hard things. Every day I'm dealing with something with the flood, and it's like, I can do hard things. It's a first-world problem, and I know that, but you just, it's a mantra, 'We can do hard things.' And if you wake up and go, 'I can do hard things. I can do hard things.' You know, my best friend Vicks, she sprained her ankle, and I'm like, 'it's ok Vick, don't conflate it. And don't add it to your 2020 story.' I mean, I think it's really important. I've had the entire COVID experience. I got very sick in March, was diagnosed with pleurisy, which left me very susceptible to COVID. My dad died of COVID. My sister almost died of COVID.
- Renata: I'm sorry, Karen. That was very early in the year, wasn't it? It was March, I think.
- Karen: And my daughter was living overseas, and I had to convince her to come back. She was like, 'mom, you're so dramatic. You're so...'
- Renata: I did that to my son as well. Yeah.
- Karen: I'm like, 'you've got 24 hours, and all the flights are gone.' And she just made it, and there were no flights. And, you know, and we need to quarantine her here. Then I had to stay with poor Maisy. And then my dad died while I was living in someone else's house. And then I yelled at her in the fridge and didn't know that she was on a Zoom call with 50 people. And maybe I swore like a Jersey mama, and maybe they talked about it for six months. Maybe I used the worst swear words out of the Sopranos. It was one of the funniest.
- Renata: You can take the girl away from New Jersey, but not the New Jersey from the girl.
- Karen: Give her pleurisy, have two of her family members, one died, and one almost died of COVID, and then have the daughter who's supposed to be not getting near her mother, in the fridge with her laptop, during the conference call with the door. I didn't see it. So it was the COVID story. Because I swore like, I can't even tell you. And they talked about it for a long time. And it was too bad the CEO of her company was on the call.
- Renata: We all have those funny stories to tell.
- Karen: Yeah. And so my advice is not to conflate the 2020 story, like stop talking about it. Don't stack. The big word is conflate, the simple word in the family we call it

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stacking. Like I sliced the top of my finger off this year, and I had to be in the emergency for two days, and I have to massage it all the time. I'm not talking about that. I'm not stacking, 'Oh my God, this happened then this happened.' Because if I stack the year, it's been a hell of a year. So don't stack, but also stare into the problem. Stare into it and say, 'okay, March, what's going to happen in March. I'm going to be ready.' You know? So stash the cash, be conservative financially, and hit everything hard because you can do hard things.

Renata: Yes. Well said. Excellent. Thank you so much for joining me. It's been a pleasure having you. I can't wait to see you when you're back in Melbourne. We're going to have a beer.

Karen: Yes, for sure. For sure. And I'm going to send you these photos because I really, really want one of the outcomes of this podcast is to celebrate the work of Business for Development because I cannot tell you how difficult it was to build the team in P and G, have everyone quarantined and get them into the Highlands and achieve this. And the timing is perfect. So I want to celebrate the guys on the ground in P and G Noel and his [inaudible] Wayne, because it has been primarily Noel and his team were just incredible. Yeah. Notwithstanding the entire B for D team in Kenya and in Melbourne and the team in Melbourne for continuing to deliver our incredibly hard programs in lockdown.

Renata: Do you want to tell the listeners a little bit about Business for Development? Because you actually didn't tell them what it actually does.

Karen: Yeah, exactly. That's good. Thank you. Self-promotion. I've got to get better at it. So Business for Development, we're not for profit, but we use business principles to solve the complex problems around rural poverty, and in particular, smallholder farmers. Smallholder farmers are farmers; there are about a billion people that live off of smallholder farming. It's between one and two hectares. And most smallholder farmers are living in a subsistence under \$3 a day life. So we work to provide them with the best agricultural inputs and solutions, smart climate change solutions. We have a team of agronomists, and agronomists are people who understand how to make things grow. We work with communities to find out what they want to grow. Then we connect them and create markets for them to be able to actually - one gets out of food security, but most importantly, build businesses, build enterprises.

Karen: And we work in East Africa, and we work in Asia. And we partner with business and government, and we use cross sector partnerships so that we're not just waiting on funding. We achieved our tax deductibility status in January, so we can now take donations. You can just hop on the website. And now we're applying for grants, which we haven't been able to do in the past because we didn't have that status. And I'd like to thank the partners that have been supporting us through this time, because the easiest thing to do is to cut these kinds of programs and organizations, like base titanium oil search, St. Barbara, Cotton on group, ACIAR, the Australian center for international agriculture and research. A lot of people don't know ACIAR. They are amazing, and just thank them for their support.

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- Renata: Excellent. Now people know, I'll put a link below as well. Of course, the episode show notes have everything that you will be searching for and questions as you listen to this and you hear names, and you want to know who this person is, just look at the episode show notes.
- Karen: Yeah. Thanks so much for the invitation.
- Renata: Thank you, Karen. See you soon.
- Karen: See you soon. Ciao.
- Renata: I hope you enjoyed this podcast, and remember that if you decide to continue to job search over the Christmas time, we have the workshop now on demand that you can listen to. It's the Optimised Job Search two-part workshop that you can now download and listen to and have the schedule that you need to ensure that you don't lose the momentum and you continue your job search. We will be here with weekly podcasts to support you. I have my weekly newsletters to support you, and we are here for you. So keeping touch, subscribe to the newsletter into the podcast, go to the workshop and download the schedule so that you can keep the momentum and don't stop. If you need a job, we're here for you. Bye for now.