

Roads Australia PPP Award 2022

Introduction

Good evening and thank you for having me in Sydney tonight. As someone who has spent the last two years in Melbourne, talking to an audience live in an interstate ballroom seems like a foreign dream of years gone past. I'm sure I've breached a COVID-19 rule somewhere.

I have several admissions to make tonight, but the first would be that I most definitely did not anticipate that I would be here accepting the Roads Australia Emerging Leader PPP Award. I actually didn't understand or appreciate the gravity of the award when I first heard the news – and unfortunately, I was a bit preoccupied sitting in a hospital admission room waiting for surgery (thank you to our incredible General Manager of Roads Hollie Hynes for letting me know and spiking my heart rate before general anaesthetic).

The second admission, which probably serves as more of a helpful reminder, is that you shouldn't plan to win awards if you don't have a half decent picture of yourself in a professional setting. I'd like to acknowledge the many eagle-eyed viewers of my LinkedIn profile who have noted that my photo was indeed taken at Flemington racecourse.

Votes of thanks

Notwithstanding my own sheer ignorance and lack of photographic preparation, it is an incredible honour to be named the Emerging Leader PPP Award Winner for 2022. I hope you can indulge me for a few moments to offer some thanks to a few individuals and organisations before I address my hope for the next 12 months.

First, to Roads Australia. I'd like to thank you for the warmth that I have felt since receiving the award. Michael Kilgariff was one of the first people to e-mail me and Simon Morgan, Prue Northey and Royce Christie have already invested so much time and energy to help me feel part of something over the last month. Thank you.

Second, to Rezarta Rushitaj, last year's PPP Award Winner. Rezarta, thank you for offering your wisdom and sharing your experience with me – you have shown that you are a compassionate leader who is willing to welcome and support a stranger. That is a rare kindness and I truly thank you for it.

Third, to Laing O'Rourke. Since I graduated from QUT, one of my most fundamental life rules was to never stay with a business for more than two years so that I could continue to grow and learn in new environments. Well after nearly 4.5 years at Laing O'Rourke, I've clearly failed. But I think that goes to show the power of the business and the investment they make in their people. Laing O'Rourke is truly focused on disrupting the industry, driving innovation and excellence in the way we go to work and fashioning a future that provides a healthier, more flexible work environment, that puts sustainability, diversity and inclusivity at the top of the agenda and that is focused on collaboratively working with clients to deliver project objectives, not just profit. The leaders that sit at that table over there should be proud for their immeasurable individual contribution to the reality we get to exist in day in, day out.

The PPP Award winner recognises an emerging leader who shows passion, pursuit and promise. However, to get the opportunity to show these characteristics, you need a fourth P – and that is a platform.

In my career to date, I have been incredibly blessed to have so many fantastic male and female mentors who have given me a platform, shared their time and their wisdom and who have put their faith in me to deliver. On a recent podcast, I said I didn't want to single out individuals for their impact on my life and career but there are four people at Laing O'Rourke who have invested in me from the very start, and I want to acknowledge those people (two of which are here tonight).

To David Capps: thank you for being there from the start, bringing me back to Australia and for teaching me the value of hard work and how to find strength in adversity.

To Lisa Rae: Lisa, you are a pillar of strength, a true leader who exemplifies grit and conviction while maintaining a genuine care for your people. You have never bowed or broken to pressure, profit or expectation, you've given the patriarchy a few upper cuts and I will always cherish your counsel, your political nous and your maternal love for me.

To the incomparable duo of Conor Hanlon and Andy Hunter. Ladies and gentlemen, I have never met two people in my life who are such seemingly easy leaders, who have taught me that it is possible to be so warm, strong and wise that people will follow you anywhere. Conor, you always say that there are three things that build jobs and that is people, people, people but these people, people, people would not build jobs for you if you were not the leader you are. Andy, I get to use your sage advice on a day-to-day basis and it is freakish how many of the pearls of wisdom ring true in almost any context.

I couldn't finish my vote of thanks without acknowledging some of the other incredible people at Laing O'Rourke who are here tonight.

- Hollie Hynes, you are a modern industry rockstar who is so authentic and is changing the game for so many young women in our industry by just being a natural.
- Sarah Conway, our fearless leader of Corporate Affairs – you can navigate any situation better than Christopher Columbus and your tireless love for your people and our business never goes unnoticed.
- Haydn Rogers, you have taught me how to balance intelligence and humility.
- Rikki Toms, you break norms more than most people break bread and you do it with a smile and without a sliver of arrogance.
- Tommy Mullens, your quiet leadership and subtle humour is refreshing in this day and age.
- Aleisha Young, thank you for showing me that vulnerability is a powerful tool that creates true connection.
- Taneal Sultana, thank you for showing everyone that leaders can be loud and vivacious and that life is just more fun with a bit of colour in it.
- Helen Fraser, I spent a good 20 seconds before talking about how the environment at Laing O'Rourke has encouraged me to stay for far longer than I planned and you have been at the forefront of our culture. I take my hat off to you.
- Carla, welcome to the business – I look forward to learning plenty from you in the future.

=====
Thank you for indulging me while I spoke about my support platform. I know it's not particularly fun when you don't know the people, but now you've got even more reason to make your way over to the Laing O'Rourke table. But now, I wanted to take a few minutes to talk about a platform for the rest of the year.

There are so many areas that I'd love to help influence change in this year, from continuing to push for sensible and collaborative contract models, to delivering sustainable and environmentally friendly project outcomes, to driving social benefit through procurement. Everyone in this room can build a job, but can you build a job that provides sustainable industry growth, that has a contract model that doesn't contribute to the irrefutable mental health issues in our industry, that doesn't unnecessarily damage the environment and that invests money into individuals and communities who need it the most?

I'll admit – even for a guy with an exceptionally large mouth, that would be a bit to chew off in 12 months.

So, maybe I'll settle for this. One of the core pillars of the Emerging Leaders Award is a diversity & inclusion lens. Now, I know what you're thinking – straight white male doesn't exactly scream D&I. Believe me, I've heard it over the past few weeks.

However, D&I doesn't have to be about gender, religion or the colour of your skin. As a law and business graduate, I have always found myself to be a bit of an odd ball within the industry, with no fixed address in one set discipline. I've had leaders tell me that my skillset would be useful in bids, in commercial, in legal and in stakeholder and communications functions, and then later tell me that without an engineering degree I'm capped, that I'm facing a glass or concrete ceiling. I must admit that on many occasions, I have come face-to-face with the real possibility that the construction industry may not be the right fit for me.

To the leaders in this room, I ask you:

- How much of your qualification do you use on a daily basis?
- Have you ever hired someone who didn't have the exact number of years experience or the exact qualification but smashed a role out of the park?
- During COVID, did you realise that some roles could be delivered flexibly?

I think if you answered those questions truthfully, you'd agree that you don't need to have an engineering degree, you don't always need to have X number of years experience and you certainly don't need to be site-based for 11 hours per day to work in construction.

In the advent of the most significant infrastructure boom in Australia's history, my message is simple: beggars can't be choosers. We need to broaden the horizon for people outside our industry, we need to recut role requirements and descriptions and yes, we may need to invest a little more time to train people up. But you don't need to be an engineer, you don't always need a specific qualification and exclusivity based on background should be best left for New York day spas.

So, if I can achieve one thing this year, it is to change the attitudes of leaders towards non-engineers and people with unique backgrounds in our industry.

Tomorrow is Friday. I can't speak to or define your agendas, but what better day to look at the available roles within your organisation, call a meeting with your People or HR manager and say: what do we actually need from the person in this role? Do they need this qualification? Do they need this many years of experience?

The business that cracks it first will reap the rewards – and have proper teams to service this massive pipeline of infrastructure work that is already on our doorstep.

I know I may be one of the last things standing in the way of dessert, a drink or even bed time. Thank you for your time tonight and I look forward to meeting so many of you soon.