

### 'The Unthinkable Is Here': What Leaders Must Do Now

Guest Speaker **KYLIE PORTER**

**"We can't turn back time and change the industrialization of our globe. So the climate crisis that we're currently in doesn't exist. We can't eliminate that now. We can only manage the risk."**

#### **Nik Gowing**

Welcome to Talking About Thinking the Unthinkable, our latest leadership conversation and podcast. Hello, I'm Nik Gowing. What's heartening in all our years of work encouraging leaders and organizations to think the unthinkable is when we hear great examples that confirm the impact of doing just that. This happened when I was keynoting a remarkable conference in Sydney, Australia, focused on radicalizing leadership to handle the enormity of challenges we face, especially on food. Well, one of the speakers was Kylie Porter.

She made a big impression. She did not need persuading. She told everyone in the hall that thinking the unthinkable is a big hairy topic that must not be avoided. It's what we do all the time. It's in our DNA. So good day, Kylie. Before we talk, let me explain that Kylie is CEO of the Greater Whitsundays Business Alliance in Australia, known as GW3. She's talking to me from Mackay, a small but fast growing city of around 195,000 in mining area way up north on the east coast of Australia and Queensland.

This is next to the Great Barrier Reef. The coast is dotted with islands known as the Whitsundays. It's speculated that Whitsundays comes from the date in 1770 when Captain Cook discovered the islands on Whitsunday. So, hi Kylie, before we hear about your remarkable achievements, first tell me about GW3. You're an economic development agency. What do you do?

#### **Kylie Porter**

Thanks, Nik. And that's right, we're an economic development agency for three regions, is Mackay, Isaac and Whitsunday. So located in a beautiful part of Queensland. And we cover a square footprint of around 90,000 square kilometres.

So there's 195,000 people across that 95,000 square kilometre footprint. So we are small in population, but mighty in size. And my job, and the job of GW3, is to look at what's our economy today, what's it made up of, what are the contributing components that make it all tick today, but more importantly, what's ahead of us, what's our economy going to be in the future and what do we need to do today to lay the foundations to achieve that future because what we know is that it's going to look very, very different to what it is right now.

#### **Nik Gowing**

Now I was very struck by that language you used when we met, a big hairy topic, thinking the unthinkables. It must not be avoided. How many employees have you got who you've got to drive to think the unthinkable?

### **Kylie Porter**

Yeah, look, we're actually a small organization. So in total, you know, we have 15 employees plus myself, you know, so our job is, you know, to work on many fronts. So we work on five areas, you know, so we practically deliver our work across five dimensions and, you know, work very hard on making sure that, you know, we create a different future through that lens of five portfolio areas.

### **Nik Gowing**

Now, I remember when we started talking about thinking the unthinkable and you were sitting on the platform. You talked about how actually a few years ago there was real resentment to think the unthinkable within your organization. How has that changed?

### **Kylie Porter**

Well, I think that when I talked about there was real resentment, or probably resentment is probably a bit strong, but there was real resistance to thinking the unthinkable across our region about what's ahead of us and what's coming next.

And, you know, I certainly think that after six years for me or seven years for me in this role as CEO, you know, that we've certainly changed the temperature of our regional community. They're far more open and willing to accept that what's ahead of us is actually going to be very different to what they've always known. So, you know, I definitely think that resentment is probably too strong a word back in 2018, but definitely resistance. You no one likes change, right? And so, you there was strong resistance to talking about topics, which actually makes many people deeply uncomfortable.

### **Nik Gowing**

Is that because they weren't prepared to think about the reality? You've described what's happening, particularly in the mining industry, as a burning platform. In other words, the very basis of the economy in the Whitsundays and Mackay was under threat, but people didn't really want to see it.

### **Kylie Porter**

Yeah and look when we talk about the fact that one of our largest industries is under threat, you know I'm talking about that over a time frame which is a generation but we need that, you need that long runway to make such structural changes to the economy.

### **Nik Gowing**

Now what I was struck by is when you described it like flying a plane while building it because of the enormity of the changes and the challenges you're facing. So how have you taken that on as CEO?

### **Kylie Porter**

Look, I think that it's really important to be agile and to have a growth mindset. I don't have all the answers to some of these big challenges that we're tackling. There are very few regions in the world which I can go, I'm just going to copy and paste what they've done here in this region. The Ruwa Valley is often used as an example of a transitioning mining economy. Completely different context, highly populated industry.

We're talking about a region that is quite regional and very remote in some parts. So it's not the same applications. So making sure that we can take the best of what some others have done, apply it to our regional circumstances, and we research the living daylights. That's a nicer way of saying it. I could have used a swear then, but I didn't. We research the living daylights out of everything that's been applied to make sure that our regional context is appropriate.

### **Nik Gowing**

Now tell me about the culture and the mindset among yourself, your staff, those working for you, and what you have to do to ensure that they are energized right on the ball, understanding where unthinkables are coming from.

### **Kylie Porter**

Yeah, look that's a really good question and culture for us is really super important. You know, we have a very strong belief that the work that we're doing was incredibly vital for the long-term sustainability of regions and communities like ours. On a day-to-day context, it is not life or death. No one is losing an eye over the work that GW3 does every single day today.

Long-term, it has profound impacts, but today, there is a certain amount of safety in being innovative and being super brave about thinking differently, when you know that it's not life or death and someone's going to lose a limb or an eye or have their jobs impacted today. So we build that culture in about being a little bit brave and looking for the reward and celebrating the small wins that we're achieving on the way.

### **Nik Gowing**

So how do you achieve that, you know, on a personal basis with you're in a meeting with your colleagues and so maybe over the water cooler, et cetera, and there are 15 or 16 of you. How do you actually create that atmosphere? I want to hear from you. I want you to be visionary as opposed to just kind of orthodox.

### **Kylie Porter**

Look, think that it actually like, A, it comes from, you know, like I'm pretty out there myself in terms of what we're willing to consider and put on the table. So I think that leadership helps. But also I have this, you know, ridiculous, you know, brass bell that I take into meetings and I ring and I call it ring the bell.

So we have these ring the bell moments where we ring this bell. And, you know, and so when anyone has a small achievement or a small more win. We need a million small wins to achieve greatness. So unless we actually call out and ring that bloody bell, you might feel like you're stuck, but we're not stuck. We have momentum. We just need to keep that going.

### **Nik Gowing**

And do they compete among each other to help you ring that bell?

### **Kylie Porter**

Oh, absolutely. They compete against, you know, but it's in a really productive, positive way. So it's also pretty surprising that we are a hundred percent female office. So this is not, you know, not by design. This is genuinely, you know, merit based. You know, so we have this, you this really, really productive, you know, collegiate way of I love what she's done.

I want to give that a go and see how that pans out for me in the portfolio I'm delivering. And so I think that that's just been such a wonderful example of what you can achieve when you kind of remove some of the limits that we've all been conditioned to working within, particularly in the pretty dry area of economic development.

### **Nik Gowing**

Now you actually raised something there which I was going to raise a bit later on, but I remember you saying that women have greater elasticity in their minds to think the unthinkable. Help me understand as a man, help me understand why that works for women and you don't really get that from men who you interview.

### **Kylie Porter**

Look, think that, and I love that, out of all the things that we talked about, Nik, you absolutely clearly got out the highlighter pen with that one and highlighted it. So I love that one. I find that the women on our team are absolutely very, very adept at problem solving real, you know, they are exceptional problem solvers and they're exceptional problem solvers in my opinion because of the juggle that life that female, being a female, you know, in this 2026 world requires of them.

They're juggling children, they're juggling professional development and additional out of work study. They're juggling relationships where their husband may work what we call a lifestyle roster. So they're only here seven days in the family unit and then they're out at work for seven days. So the amount of juggling that has happened that they do and deal with on the day today means that

they have this amazing neuroplasticity I think about being able to switch your thinking, change ears very quickly and I think that I love seeing it play out. It's great.

### **Nik Gowing**

How do you detect that? How do you measure it? Obviously, you don't have a rapid turnover of staff with only 15 or 16 people working while you're with you. But what would you say, we don't want to get stuck on this, but is the limiting factor, particularly with a lot of men who would like to work for your organization, but don't quite fit the bill? What are they missing?

### **Kylie Porter**

Look, and I'm going to be really honest, I don't get a lot of men who apply to work for our organization. So we're a highly industrialized, know, community and region, you know, so there is strong competition, you know, for anybody, you know, who has strong skill sets in our region.

So, you know, we have an exceptionally low unemployment rate. know, so I we don't necessarily receive lots of applications from men. I receive lots of applications from women because, you know, we have developed a reputation for being a very flexible, inclusive workplace, and that's very attractive when you're managing that juggle, right? That juggle of life.

Our men in the workforce have lots of opportunities, job opportunities, which are typically far more well-paid than what economic development, not-for-profit land can deliver them. And so I don't necessarily see that... that barrier, you know, would I employ a man? Absolutely, you betcha. If I thought that they could fit with the culture and they ticked all of our boxes, absolutely.

### **Nik Gowing**

Do they have to be visionary? That's one of the things we say in all our work.

### **Kylie Porter**

You have to have curiosity. So I call it curiosity. So I'm looking for someone to be curious about why we do things the way we do things or why we have found ourselves here. I want to unpack that and unpick it because I think therein lies some of the answers to these solutions for these big wicked problems that we're facing. So curiosity for me is absolutely key.

### **Nik Gowing**

Why do you call thinking the unthinkable necessary but a big hairy topic, as you put it?

### **Kylie Porter**

I think that and this is and I don't know whether or not this is a uniquely Australian thing. I'd be interested to see what you thought about this. know, Australia has come out probably, we're probably actually still in this era, where we are very conscious around, you know, making sure that we position hard topics, you know, well, you know, that we insert it into our national dialogue in a way that's not going to create, you know, much angst at either end of that spectrum. So I think that

we've lost our ability to be able to, you know, have these tough conversations because we're so scared of getting it wrong. We're so scared of creating fear. We're so scared of creating anger.

But these are all emotions that should just be part and parcel of decision making, right? You should be able to use your critical thinking skills, you know, and consider all of those and come out with the best option. If we don't give, you know, our communities a chance to be involved and consider, you know, the unthinkable things, then, you know, how are they really ever going to be prepared for what's ahead?

### **Nik Gowing**

What does that tell us about risk and attitude to risk and resilience then? Because one of the things I heard you say is society is too faint at heart to understand the enormity of what's happening. We all need to say it louder for those in the back. How do you make it appear or sound louder? In other words, make it a central part of your operating ethos.

### **Kylie Porter**

I think it's that bravery piece. know, how do we so, you know, again, this, you know, interested if it's a uniquely Australian thing, you know, rather than risk mitigation, you know, we can only manage risk, we can only do our best, you know, to mitigate, you know, some of these big risky, hard, hairy things that are ahead of us, you know, we can't eliminate them.

We can't turn back time and change the industrialization of our globe. So the climate crisis that we're currently in doesn't exist. We can't eliminate that now. We can only manage the risk. Yet, because we can't have this perfect, neat, tidy solution to some of the problems, you which has a pretty little bow on the top of it, we don't do it. And, you we avoid these conversations.

So I think that all it needs, not all it needs, because that's minimizing it. I think that what it needs is a good, you know, big dose of bravery and having a plan for dealing with the consequences of what bravery brings.

### **Nik Gowing**

Now, imagine we were sitting around with your 15 colleagues and I was sitting there as part of the group and saying, what is it about working for GW3 which really makes you feel this is something special? In other words, you're contributing much more than you'd normally contribute in another company or organization.

### **Kylie Porter**

I think it's that ability, it's the opportunity to work on some, I think it's that opportunity to work on some of these unthinkables. I think the fact that we are talking about some of the things that are so incredibly hard and are so incredibly, but equally so incredibly important, I think that that's actually what gives them that little buzz, that boost. Lots of them could probably go work in the private sector, earn great money, more money than what a not-for-profit can pay them, but they're really

incredibly motivated by the mission, you know, that we want our regional communities to be here in decades and generations to come, you know, and that means that we've got to really, really, you know, change what's ahead for us in terms of our economic structure.

### **Nik Gowing**

Look, we're almost at the end. We've got a couple of minutes left. Give me an idea. We always like to end with a message to encourage, to inspire. What is it about what you've done and the fact that I've come to you, I've been really impressed by what I've heard from you in several conversations about a blueprint, a model for how to take this forward, how others can learn from what you've been doing and the success you've had.

### **Kylie Porter**

So, you know, I actually, I call it the secret sauce and I do speak elsewhere around Australia about our secret sauce. It's actually pretty, it's pretty boring and it's pretty basic. It's like, you know, Nonna's amazing spaghetti sauce. It probably only has three ingredients as well. You know, number one for us is you've got to invest in the evidence.

So, you know, just because, like I said, you know, the Ruhr Valley in Germany has transitioned their economy doesn't mean that that'll apply, I can cut and paste and roll it out here. We've had to really invest hard into understanding what our strengths and skill sets and capabilities are because that's what's going to lead us to what's next. So investing in the evidence, making sure that you then don't chase any butterflies, you're sticking to your evidence base. That's ingredient number one. Number two is taking others on the journey.

So we have good and solid momentum. I equate being a part of GW3 or as being welcome to checking, you're checking into Hotel California. Once you check in, you can never leave. So we stay connected with our key stakeholders. We take them on the journey. I'll never let them go. And then the third one is persistence. This is a long game. So our region is at least 62 % reliant on one sector which is coal mining, that took 55 years to get us there. It is unrealistic to think that we are going to find replacement industries in five. So we've got to be persistent, we've got to have long hard endurance. So they're my three things, evidence, journey making and then persistence.

### **Nik Gowing**

Now, look, finally, a little bit of an add on if we can. We're talking several weeks into the horror of the war in Iran, and you are in a remote part of eastern Australia, right up in the northeast corner there. Was this an unthinkable which has hit your town, your city, your region? In other words, a place thousands of miles from where the war is going on, but having an immediate impact, quickly if you can.

### **Kylie Porter**

Absolutely. It has an immediate impact. know, so we are, you know, our fuel prices have almost doubled. We're a region that imports two billion litres of diesel to operate our industrialised

economy. You know, this impact will have wide and far reaching impacts, you know, not just in our region, but across our, but across our nation and across the globe. You know, it's crazy. It was an unthinkable.

### **Nik Gowing**

But until a few weeks ago, this was unthinkable for your region.

### **Kylie Porter**

You know, like COVID, you know, these, you know, the idea and the time that Australia is an island at the bottom end of the earth and we are immune to what goes on elsewhere, that era has gone, you know, and how do we prepare ourselves, you know, for all of these global shocks, you know, that's been a great wake up for our country.

### **Nik Gowing**

All right, Kylie. Well, thank you so much. We could talk for much longer, but thank you so much for joining us. And you can reference every detail that Kylie's given us. That's because a transcript of the podcast is posted in parallel on our website. That's along with contact details for us and, course, for Kylie, if you want to talk directly and get that experience.

Do please share your experiences with Thinking the Unthinkable when we next have a conversation. Subscribe to our YouTube channel where you'll find many more podcasts in the same vein as what I've been talking with Kylie about, very much in the same vein of frankness. And from me, Nik Gowing, until the next time, keep thinking the unthinkable. More than ever, it's both possible and it's necessary, as we've just heard from Kylie. So from both of us, bye bye.