Sarah Samson:

Welcome back to those rejoining, and a warm welcome to those joining for the first time today. We have an exciting afternoon ahead, and we do hope you can stay with us. If it happens that you can't be with us for the whole afternoon, please remember that we will be recording these sessions and we'll send links to recorded content and other information after the event. So we'll start this afternoon's sessions with a look at the ways corporate culture and leadership are evolving in the construction industry, and some of the key factors affecting the outlook for construction in future.

Leadership and culture can make or break an organization and both organizations and investors will be affected by change and challenge. If you happen to have a question on this topic, please ask our presenters via the Q and A function found on the top right of your screen. So I'd now like to introduce Cathryn Carver, executive of client coverage at NAB, to host our next session on leading in a complex, challenging and changing world. Thank you Cath, and over to you.

Cathryn Carver:

Excellent. Big thanks Sarah, and I'm glad everything's been going so well this morning from what I've heard. Look, a big hello to everyone. And again, as Sarah said, I'd really like to welcome you all to this session on leading in a complex, challenging and changing world. I'm Cathryn Carver, as Sarah mentioned, and I'm delighted to be speaking to you from NAB's head office here in Melbourne.

Today we are going to be looking at the changing face of the construction sector. Construction, like so many other sectors, is an industry facing into many challenges [inaudible 00:01:41] corporate culture, leadership as Sarah mentioned, global, domestic influences, issues around attracting and retaining skills and talent, financing, and also operations and operational excellence, supply chain issues, the list goes on. And also in an inflationary environment ever rising costs.

The strategies to address these over the next decade, I believe are going to be critically important, not only to the construction industry but broader, and its continuing contribution to the nation's infrastructure and growth. Against this backdrop, who better to give us some insider insights into how the industry is rising to meet these challenges, is our very special guest Allison Mirams, executive chair of Roberts Co. A big welcome to you Allison, and you're joining us from Sydney. Hi.

Alison Mirams:

Hi Cath. Thank you for your very kind words.

Cathryn Carver:

Very easy to make. Look, before we hear from Alison, I'd like to tell you a bit about her, her career and why she's so passionate about helping to guide some of the key transitions in this sector. Alison has more than 20 years experience in construction and has some strong commercial expertise, matched with significant site experience. She's known for her unique approach, including attention to detail, commercial savvy, client centricity, and a keenness for negotiating.

In 2017, after successfully operating at both Brookfield Multiplex and Lendlease in an executive capacity, Alison took over the role of chief executive officer at the boutique tier one construction firm of Robert's Co. Alison has since built the company to over 140 full-time staff and supporting over 600 million build pipeline. As a senior female executive in an industry working towards greater diversity, Alison is absolutely passionate about driving positive change in construction through her leadership and mentoring, and is regularly addressing key industry groups as a keynote speaker. I know Alison as a very purpose driven and extremely authentic leader, and I'm sure you will be both inspired by her today and a little challenged, which we quite like, when she shares some of her journey and some of her insights. So now Alison, over to you.

Alison Mirams:

Thanks so much, Cath. Just over six years ago, I took a phone call that would change the direction of my career and in many respects would change the construction industry in Australia. Andrew Roberts rang me and asked me to be CEO of his new construction company. I would be tasked to build a construction company from scratch. He was coming back into the industry after leaving it for 10 years. I was given 45 million of seed capital and the backing of construction royalty, as the Roberts family had founded Multiplex 60 years before. An incredible opportunity, a once in a lifetime opportunity.

The mandate from the board was very simple. Build the best construction company we could. I was given a blank shade of paper. So imagine if you were given a blank shade of paper, what would you do differently? What are the weaknesses in your current business that you wouldn't repeat? Could you create something that could leave a positive legacy for the industry in which you operate? Our business plan was formed by looking back through our careers. What worked, repeat it. What didn't work, don't ever do it again. And from 25 years of working in the construction industry, both on sites and in corporate offices, I knew we had to make the most of this opportunity and really build a better way.

The construction industry is the third largest employer in Australia. We produce around 9% of GDP. And the government consistently stimulates infrastructure and construction to drive the economy. But when we look at the industry in detail, it's not a pretty picture. MATES in Construction research tells us that a construction worker is six times more likely to die from suicide than a workplace accident. Every year, 190 workers take their own lives. We suffer from presenteeism with tight deadlines, and busy is worn as a badge of honor. Divorce is common.

ABS data tells us that 12.7% of the construction industry is female and less than 2% of all tradespeople are women. The female participation rate has not changed in the past 35 years. According to WGEA, the gender pay gap in the construction industry is the second highest in the country. The contractor's risk profile has ballooned to an unreasonable place, accepting risks and liabilities well beyond what is reasonable and beyond what is decent. And construction companies make on average only one to two percent net profit. I knew we couldn't change the statistics, but we could influence them by how we behaved as the head contractor.

When we started in 2017, there was a real need for another contractor at the top end of the market. Consolidation of companies had meant we'd lost [inaudible 00:07:21] Hollands, Baulderstone, Abigroup, and Grocon. It was the perfect time to start a competitor and to really challenge the big boys and their behavior.

Looking back over the past six years in leading Roberts Co, I can evenly divide that six years into two segments. The first three years were amazing. It was hard work, but we were building a company and were having so much fun. We'd won two commercial office towers. We'd won a government hospital. We'd successfully challenge the working norms of the industry. We had over a hundred employees and over half a billion dollars of work. And then the next three years have been the hardest of my career. I feel like I've been on a rollercoaster that I couldn't control. We've been through the perfect storm where everything that could be thrown at us was. And as they say, what doesn't kill you will make you stronger. So I feel like I now have the credentials to enter the world's strongman competition. Never in my wildest dreams did I think the business plan would be stress tested three years in, but it was.

So if I take you back to January 2020, when we had one of the worst bushfire seasons on record, I've never seen six smoke blankets Sydney for weeks on end. And with construction workers working outside, breathing outside air, we lost many days production. Three months later in March 2020, COVID arrived. Sydney-siders were instructed to work from home, which was difficult for construction sites, but we were one of the lucky industries, because we were kept open. As we had to socially distance everyone, it meant reduced people in hoist and lifts, so we lost productivity. But the government opened construction and allowed us to work our Monday to Friday hours, Monday to Sunday. And if you were working on a hospital, you could work 24/7, 7 days a week. It was relentless and the workers didn't get rest. Wives and partners were unhappy that workers were in the face of the virus every day. And remember at this point in time, we didn't know much about COVID.

Fast forward a year to June '21 when the Delta strain arrived in Sydney. I remember saying to my team, "This is easy. We've got this. We know construction won't be shut down, just sit back and enjoy the ride." And I could not have been more wrong. On Saturday, the 17th of July, a day etched in my memory, I was standing in the kitchen, EarPods in, listening to Gladys's daily 11:00 AM press conference, as was my habit, to hear her announce that construction was shut. It was shut immediately for the next two weeks. No notice, no warning. My 10 year old son has never heard me swear at home, but I can assure you he did that day. The industry was not briefed on the stoppage for another 24 hours. I think once government figured out that stopping construction would actually stop manufacture, that they realized the gravity of their decision and they formed working groups to meet each day to work out how to reopen the industry as quickly as we could.

Once we were open, the rollercoaster picked up speed. The government changed the rules on us 17 times in the next 13 weeks, we grew to love what we called the Friday specials, the announcement on a Friday for implementation on the Monday. And whilst I love going to Bunnings, I can't go to Bunnings and buy 5,000 masks for a Monday morning. When Gladys sadly departed, Dominic Perrottet came in, and he opened us up for business, and we all thought he's going to be our savior. We went into Christmas thinking we'll be back to normal in 2022. But the rollercoaster was just warming up for a 360 degree loop.

In January '22, omicron exploded, up to 90,000 cases a day. And whilst we no longer had LGAs locked down, we still didn't have a workforce. You either had COVID, you were isolating for COVID, or you were staying home because you didn't want catch COVID. And as we came out of one loop on the rollercoaster, we went into a second loop, but this one had a twist. La Nina arrived with brutal force. In January and February, between COVID and excessive rainfall, we only achieved 27% productivity on site. We passed the mean yearly rainfall on the 7th of April. During 2022, we endured three rounds of La Nina, which meant we only achieved an average productivity on site of 60%.

Now builders normally allow between 12 to 15 percent total contingency, with about nine of that allocated to the effects of weather, be it rain, wind, or heat. So you don't have to be a mathematician to work out that there is a large difference between 12 to 15 percent allowance, and 40 percent loss of productivity. And to top it off, we then experienced excessive and rapid cost escalation.

Now we need to think about escalation in two buckets, systemic or in cycle escalation, and out of cycle escalation. And there is a base level of systemic escalation built into all construction pricing. Things like concrete supply ratchets, EBA increases and the like. But the much less predictable component of out of cycle escalation, which has been seen in many material supply costs, is very hard to predict. Reinforcement has increased 74 percent since late 2020, from 1150 to 2000 dollars a ton, and fixed lump sum prices are no longer offered.

Concrete supply prices are rising due to increased energy costs, and the rises are well in excess of our normal systemic allowances. Shipping containers used to be two to three thousand a container. They went to 16 thousand a container, before leveling off at eight to 10 thousand a container. This has now moderated further, but import costs were a massive hit to the bottom line. Electrical services had a significant hit in the last 12 months, with a 60% increase in copper cable, 50% increase in cable trays due to the shortage of stock, and a global shortage on chips required for the drivers in light fittings.

And while copper has dropped from its highs earlier this year, the supply chain has not wound back to match. They tell me there's a lag in the price coming down, but I can assure you there was no lag on the way up. Mechanical services subcontractors are reporting a 15% increase on materials for pipe work and duct work. A hundred mil PVC pipe has been the same price for the last 25 years, but in the last two years it's increased two and a half times its previous level. Plasterboard subcontractors are reporting a 25 to 30 percent increase on supply of studs and plasterboard over the last 12 months. And there's considerable uncertainty about future manufacturing in terms of energy costs. Timber and structural steel increased on average around 30% last year, roofing products 35%, and the rising costs of energy and fuel flow through all pricing. These prices are driven by coal price increases, gas price increases, and the war in Ukraine.

And of course, scarcity of labor in an underemployed labor market drives up costs. Enormous price rises impacting an industry that typically allows anywhere between zero and five percent for escalation. The extreme lockdowns in China and the war in Ukraine continue to constrain supply, and some materials have simply not been available, whatever price you'd like to pay. But I must add, it's been incredibly disappointing to read BlueScope announce its highest annual profit in its 20 year history. Maersk, the major shipping line, announced a record profit of 31 billion dollars, up from previous guidance of 24 billion. And in February Shell reported adjusted earnings of 39.9 billion, which comfortably surpassed the 28 billion in 2008, which was the firm's previous annual record. And it's more than double their profit in FY '21. So one must question, were the price rises necessary or were they simply opportunistic?

La Nina was not considered a force majeure event in metropolitan Sydney. COVID was not considered a force majeure event. Biological events were not included in the force majeure definition of most contracts. So builders had little to no entitlement for relief of COVID, no relief for La Nina, and no ability to pass on the huge cost escalation. The impact on builders and subcontractors has been immense, with all these costs landing as a perfect storm at the point in time where balance sheets were most stretched from COVID. It's no wonder the construction industry is the largest sector in the ASIC insolvency data set, with an average of 1,550 insolvencies per annum over the last nine years. We've recently seen the collapse of Clough and Probuild, but this is not a new phenomenon. If I remind you of some, you may have forgotten; Girvan, Walter Constructions, concrete Constructions, Kell & Rigby, Stuart Brothers, Reed Constructions, Grocon, Ganellen, ABD group, BA Murphy, Condev and Pindan, to name a few.

In January, the Australian printed an article that showed the revenue for 12 of the country's largest private construction companies rose 10% in the last 12 months. But with labor shortages and supply chain difficulties, the combined profit fell more than 50% to an average of less than 1% profit. Jason Tracy from Deloitte's insolvency practice was quoted in the AFR last week saying, "Nobody predicted COVID, nobody predicted the inflationary pressures, nobody predicted the supply chain issues that ensued. I think the contracting model is broken because too much risk has been pushed onto head contractors." And I couldn't agree more. By compelling contractors to take on risks they can't always control, we're eroding margins and we're stifling innovation in our industry. And whilst we can make ourselves feel better and blame the past three years for the worst market conditions, they really have only masked the underlying issues.

So with all that positive news, let me take you back to the start of our conversation. I was given a blank sheet of paper and a mandate to build the best construction company we could. The industry is broken and the time for talk is over. We need structural enduring change to fix this industry that I so love. In starting Roberts, we decided to take a vocal leadership position, sometimes to my personal detriment. People often ask me why we did that. And my answer is simple. The industry suffers from, "that's the way we've always done it." For 35 years we've been doing the same thing. So if we don't do it now with a blank sheet of paper, who will? We are the builders constructing a world that has never been built before, so it's in our hands. I've spoken about how hard COVID was both personally and professionally, but COVID had a silver lining. It put the construction industry into the largest experiment on flexible working, and it was a resounding success.

For too long, I have listened to men tell me you can't work flexibly and be on a construction site, or you can't work part-time and be on a construction site. But COVID proved beyond a doubt you can. Dads experienced being home for dinner with the family, and men finally realized that flexibility is not a women's issue, it's a people issue. And three years on from the start of COVID, we're still seeing people hesitating returning to offices. They've experienced flexibility and they don't want to give that up. Growing up in the construction industry, I always felt like we had to fix the industry for women. But when my son was born, I realized how wrong that was. The long days at home with a newborn, I realized the partners and wives of construction workers are single parents Monday to Saturday. Dads get up before the kids are awake, and dads get home when the kids are in bed. Construction firms acknowledge these issues and implement initiatives that seek to support individuals, like employee assistance programs, instead of making structural change.

In establishing Roberts Co, I was determined that we would fix the industry for everyone. Now, there's not a silver bullet to fix the industry. It really is the sum of a lot of low-hanging fruit. And I think that's why it's so difficult to change, because it's not one thing, it's many. And with a blank sheet of paper, we had the ability to tackle it all at the same time. And whilst there are many things we've done, we really concentrated on two things. The first is to act with decency and the second is to work Monday to Friday, and give a weekend to every worker. They're simple, but they flow through everything we do.

So let's start with decency. We've all heard of your IQ and your EQ, your intelligence and your emotional intelligence, but you can have very high emotional intelligence and still be an ass. Your emotional intelligence just makes you aware you're an ass and you don't care. But if you have your DQ, your decency quotient, then you won't be an ass. So at Roberts Co we have IQ, EQ and DQ.

Decency goes through everything we do; when we employ into pay bands, regardless of current salary, why we install thank you signs on our projects to thank our loyal subcontractors and suppliers, why we treat the supply chain with decency and respect, when we consciously close the gender pay gap by promoting women before they go on maternity leave, and paying superannuation whilst on maternity leave, when we review our risk profile downstream to make sure it's fair, why we pay our supply chain every 20 days, and why we have male and female and breastfeeding rooms on our sites. Decency is the lens through which we always look.

The second item was for our projects to only work five days a week and give a weekend to every worker. Introducing a weekend, something that most workers take for granted doesn't sound like a radical intervention. However, in the Australian construction industry, the practice of working on Saturday at double time is deeply rooted, as we work to evermore demanding schedules. So when we tended Concord Hospital for New South Wales Health Infrastructure, we said to them, "You of all clients can't allow someone to die from suicide caused by workplace stress." So we said, "Let's build it five days a week. Let's engage the University of Near South Wales to study it." And they agreed the working day, which normally operates from 7:00 till 3:00 was extended to work from 7:00 till 5:00. The subcontractors generally work their same total hours, but instead of being across six days, it was across five, giving workers access to overtime pay if they wanted it, but importantly, two days on the weekend to rest.

Over three quarters of workers said they preferred to work a five day week. The workers reported an increase in all areas of job satisfaction. The greatest improvements were made in areas of work-life balance, work hours, and job security. Workers said they felt definitely happier, were less fatigued and did not dread returning to work on Monday. Working five days a week in lieu of six, gives workers an additional six weeks of leave per annum. Yes, it's not in one block, but it is an additional day every weekend. And if you think how good you feel after having an additional day on a long weekend, you can understand why. For every eight years they work on a five day site, they get an additional year of time with their family. And if we put that through a 40 year career, that could amount to five years of additional time with their family. Workers reported improved quality of life, improved family relationships.

Workers were able to spend more time with their children and they noticed an improvement in the quality of their relationships. Workers enjoyed free weekends, which allowed them to watch their children's sport. And one of my crane drivers said to me, "I can see my son's face from the sideline when he scores a try and I don't have to watch it on Facebook." Heartbreakingly, half of the workers said they never or hardly ever spent time with their partner, their family, their friends, or spent time relaxing. Subcontract owners said it was their most productive and safest site. Next of kin reported a distinct change in the behavior and wellbeing of their partners at home. They were more receptive, less angry, happier and more active with the kids. But what really surprised me was the feedback from the next of kin, that the six day working week perpetuates a gender stereotype that dad is a breadwinner and mum is a carer. Women have left working to do all of the caring responsibilities. One partner said, "If my husband left me, I'd have nothing."

Now we know that women over 50 are the largest group of homeless in the country. So not only are we poor at bringing women into construction, they leave 39% faster than men, we're stopping women from working in society. And remember we are the third largest industry in the country. So I am now acutely aware that if there is a father in our office working late, there is a partner who has left to pick up the kids. Getting the dads out the door on time will make a massive difference to women's ability to work. The project finished on time. There is no additional cost and there is no additional time required to work five days a week. We achieved higher levels of productivity. And isn't that what we are all chasing?

Construction industry norms are so deeply ingrained that a real challenge to the five day week is simply resistance to change. I'm threatening the, "that's the way we always do it." Last week at a breakfast breakfast with the CFMEU in Melbourne, they told me when I arrived in Melbourne in April last year with the acquisition of Probuild, all the other builders complained bitterly, and they're very worried about me making waves down there. Apparently they call me the wolf in sheep's clothing. And there is one thing I know for sure, I am not a sheep. I am not doing what's always been done, because it's broken. We need to fix this industry for the generations that will follow in our footsteps. Concord Hospital was a success. Health Infrastructure has subsequently told the industry they want a five day program submitted in all tenders. We now only submit a five day program, regardless of what we're asked for.

In addition, the government cultural task force used the research to inform a construction industry culture standard that will be implemented on all government projects in New South Wales and Victoria. The standard has three elements; a time for life, working five days a week, putting health back in WHS, because for too long people have shouted safety and whispered health, and improving the diversity in the industry, starting with gender and then working through all forms of diversity. The industry is changing as a result of our vocal leadership, but there is only so much I can do from the contractor side. We need clients to act with decency and stop chasing the lowest price on a tender. The race to the bottom is building an unsustainable industry.

As I reflect on my experience over the past six years, leading a startup through the toughest business conditions, I have learned and grown a lot as a human-centered leader. I've learned not to take criticism from someone I wouldn't go to for advice. I've learned that if I believe in my heart, I will pursue it until I achieve it. I've learned to be honest and open with my staff. I communicated often and open and I'm comfortable to say I don't know or I need to sleep on that. And I've constantly used my dad's advice. If I don't know what to do, try something, try anything. If it doesn't work, try something else. Just don't ever stop trying.

Leadership through COVID felt like I was a pilot in a flight simulator. I was thrown into a scenario. It was constantly changed. And things that would only happen in your wildest dreams kept being added to the scenario to see how mentally tough I was and whether I could cope under pressure. But it wasn't a simulator. I was holding real lives and real money. I was on full display to our staff and they were the ones critiquing. Would they like how I behaved? Would they see my empathy and understand? Or would they expect a different outcome?

In times of crisis, you see people's true colors. We saw which clients were reasonable, which clients hid behind the black letter contracts, and which ones truly cared for people and not just their bottom line. We saw how individuals behaved, not companies, and people noticed. So as you reflect on how you and your business have weathered the uncertain times of the past three years, what would you do differently? And are you pushing an agenda based on profit, or are you aware of the impact of your actions will have on your employees and their extended families? If you were given a blank sheet of paper, what would you do differently? And if I can leave you of one piece of advice, don't wait for the blank piece of paper. Act now. Thank you.

Cathryn Carver:

Awesome. I knew, I said to everyone, you'll be both inspired and you'll be somewhat challenged. I think I said a little bit challenged. Even I, sitting here in Melbourne, felt a bit more challenged. So you certainly gave us what I suggested to the audience they would get. I think that challenger mindset, just your own personal growth, and that willingness to learn, and creating an environment to keep learning, were some of the real takeaways. And just a little bit of vulnerability there, which I think is a really critical way of building up trust, whether it be internally or externally. Look, Alison, thank you so much.

Love to get some audience participation in terms of some questions to ask Alison. And we've got a couple off the mark here, so if you bear with me, Alison, I'll just read off my screen in front of me. We've got the first question is, "How is the construction sector set to weather the current economic climate?" And you annunciated quite clearly some of the challenges in the beginning of your talk, so I'd just like to share that question with you and get your insights.

Alison Mirams:

Yeah, look, I think construction companies have learned a huge amount over the last three years. And they've realized that pricing really keenly hasn't left enough room for movement, with the cost escalation, with labor shortages, with supply chain issues. And we've had a lot of discussion between construction companies saying we can't price like that anymore. And so I think you will see a very strong difference. I know we're having discussions with clients saying, "Look, we can take the risk on these items. We can't take the risk on those items." So I'm not talking about full rise and fall provisions, but I am saying there are certain elements, and there's probably half a dozen that really need to have an open discussion. But also to think differently about it because there are some things if we can get advanced payment, we can pay for it and remove the cost escalation discussion.

So I think the level of maturity is increasing and people are now having really open conversations. If you follow John Davies from the Australian Contractors Association, he has been very vocal, and I would suggest you do follow him, in the issues that exist in the industry. And I also think we need to bring lawyers on the journey who constantly push risk onto contractors. And they say to clients, "That's market." It's not market and continually pushing those risks, will just eradicate more builders. So I know there are many contractors out there who are saying, "I'm not pricing like that anymore. I need to have contingency, I need to program properly." But let's talk to our clients about that. I think you'll see a lot more early contractor involvement contracts come out, where we work together for the first six months or weeks, however long a developer has, to really look at what the risks are in the project. How do we remove the risks? What are the opportunities we can capitalize for everyone's benefit?

Cathryn Carver:

Thanks Allison. I'm just going to pivot slightly to a topic more around just how you get more young women into a very male oriented. And so the question is, "What are your best career tips and insights for young women in male dominated industries like construction?"

Alison Mirams:

If I give you two, the first one that's really worked for me is choose your attitude. And that is, Do you choose to take criticism and offense or do you choose to take it as a compliment? Like the comment about I'm the wolf in sheep's clothing, I quite like that. Whether I'm a wolf or not, I'm certainly not a sheep. You've got to choose whether you want to take offense. And I would say take the compliment, because quite often men don't mean to be offensive, it just comes out, they don't realize what they've said. It comes out the wrong way. So that's the first one.

The second one is take every opportunity that's given to you. I see so many women say, "It was only offered to me because I'm a girl." I got it when I was in one of our organizations and I'd get invited to everything because the CEO wanted 33% of the organization, which the organization was at every event, there had to be 33% female representation. I got invited to everything. And my fellow GMs would say to me, "You're only there because you're a girl." And I'd say, "Yep, maybe, but I'm there and you are not." So I owned it. I was in the room. I was networking. So if you are offered something as a girl, it doesn't matter why you're offered it, because I can tell you men never turn it down. They just say yes. So please grab it, please take it, and please run with it as hard as you can.

Cathryn Carver:

I remember when you first told me that story and I thought, yep. And I've told that story many times since she first told to me. It's definitely an attitude thing. Look, let me just, there's another question has just come in. "How optimistic are you on the progress so far," and you've teased, you've touched on this a little bit, "so far in taking on the social challenges within your industry?" So again, you did share some of those views before, but just like to see your more holistic perspective.

Alison Mirams:

Look, I think it's definitely changing. When we tended Concord, I think it was 2019 to 2023. We are seeing a difference. I would say the industry is pretty divided in two. There are contractors that are well on board and there are contractors that are not. John Hollands won Randwick Kids Hospital, five days a week. Hansen Yuncken are building UNSW Health Hub five days a week. Icon have publicly come out in the paper and said, "We'll put five and six day tenders in everywhere."

My attitude is the next generation don't want to do Saturdays, so they will change the industry. And why wait till they get to the top? Why not do it now so we can all enjoy it? So there is very much a split. If we think back to when Green Star came in, GBCA said we're going to do Green Star and everyone poo-pooed it and said it'll be too expensive, it's not worth paying for. But one of the [inaudible 00:35:03] said, "We're going to do it. We're going to put it through our portfolio." And once one [inaudible 00:35:07] they all followed. So I just need one private client to say, yes, we're going to do it. It will change. And government is on board to make the change.

The culture standard is in pilot stage, there are six projects being piloted and they're being researched to get the data. And then it will change. Interestingly, the union are on board, which is a huge win for us. And they spoke to their members and their members said, "We want it." And if you look at the industry, we're building things for people, maybe not to come back to work, to have flexibility. So why is the construction industry still working six days a week to build something for people to come back to work three or four days a week? And we're so behind. You look in New Zealand and you look in the other side of the world, people are talking about going to four days a week. I'm just saying, can we work five? So it is definitely changing, but I'd say at the moment it's split 50/50 and some will just get brought along, knuckles dragging on the ground. And that's okay.

Cathryn Carver:

Thank you for that candor. Another question that's just come in. "You've been a powerful advocate for improving culture in the construction industry, so it can be more inclusive with more opportunities for obviously talent to be attracted and retained. What do you think other industries could learn specifically from your industry?"

Alison Mirams:

Oh wow. That's a good question. What I think we've done really well is at the moment we're acknowledging the issues. We are talking about the issues. So first step is to acknowledge what the issues are and then to work out how we can address it. We have a long way to go. When I talk to the underwriters about what we've done, they tell me it's revolutionary. I'm like, "It's so basic it hurts, because we started off such a low bar." And at the moment we're trying to fix it for women. We still need to fix it for the LGBTI community. It's a very, very hard environment for them. So we haven't got that right. But I think it's about showing people.

One of the things that helped with us in bringing women into the industry was that the old adage that you had to be strong and you have to be a man to do things, the codes helped us, that you can't lift more than 20 kilos. You can't. I think it might even be lower than that now. So the argument that you have to be a man to be able to do this is no longer relevant. And really COVID helped enormously, because it forced us to think differently. So many, many changes in history have come about from world wars. We didn't have a world war, but the whole world was involved in COVID, and it really made us think differently. So I think just sitting back and looking at your industry and saying, "What do we do well and what do we do badly? How do we make it better?" Because we all need people, we all need talent, and it's very, very hard to get, and it's hard to keep.

Cathryn Carver:

Excellent, thank you for that. We've got another question here. We've probably got time for maybe one more after this. For those of you who are very keen to get into the chat page. "As one of only a few women at CEO level in the industry, how do you role model your approach to inclusion, and how does that translate to your leadership team?"

Alison Mirams:

So how do I role model it? I do it very openly. And I get a lot of people who write to me on LinkedIn. I write back to everyone. I get a lot of ladies asking me if they can meet for a coffee. I always say yes. I met a young girl this morning from GPT, she wanted some advice on how to be on a panel, on how to bring her whole self to work. And I met her. And hopefully then she'll pay that forward as well. So I always make time for women. When we're in the office, very open leadership. As I said, I'm happy to say, I don't know. I'm happy to say I need to sleep on it. I openly demonstrate I don't know everything.

I've never built a company from scratch. I've learned a lot in the last six years. But I also challenge our staff constantly to say we need to make sure we've got diversity across age, across gender, across indigenous. We don't suffer from ethnicity in the construction industry. We have a huge spread of people from different cultures and we obviously need to have gender. And that's constantly pushing them to say, every month we report on it in our papers, every month we talk about it. And when we're recruiting people that look or feel like us, I challenge them. And I do say, "Is that the right person? Is that what we're doing?" I have stopped a couple of recruitments to say, "No, not the right person. We need to think differently and get a huge amount of challenge in the team."

My CFO I employed from outside of industry. She came from retail, because I wanted her to come in and say, "Why do you do that? That's a bit silly". And so we encourage that really strong conversation to say, "Is that the right thing?" And if you see that happening at the top, then that empowers staff to behave the same way. So we really try and lead that behavior. I leave the office early. I come in after I drop off my son. When I'm out of office, say I've gone to his swimming carnival, I write it on my out of office so everyone knows where I am. So it's really about not talking about it. It's about doing it.

Cathryn Carver:

Well look, it's been an absolutely amazing session. I've learned a lot myself and will have caused for reflection, post this session. I did promise everyone very much a purpose-driven and authentic leader who was going to talk to us today. And that's absolutely what you did in spades. Can I just thank you on behalf of everyone that's here, zooming in to this Capital Markets event hosted by ourselves? Thank you for being a client. Thank you for being a friend. And thank you for coming today. So I'm going to hand back to John and Sarah in the host lounge. Have a great afternoon. Thanks again Alison.

Alison Mirams:

Thanks Cathryn. Thanks for NAB's support. You have been amazing to our organization and we value our relationship with you so much. So thank you very much.

Cathryn Carver:

And I didn't tell her to say that.

John Bennett:

What a wonderful and great discussion Cath and Allison. Thank you so much, so thought-provoking, lots for us to think about. The construction industry in Australia is look, definitely seeing as we've heard, its fair share of challenges. But it's really great to hear how innovation, strong values, leadership, and a solid culture is driving such positive change at Roberts Co. Look, and hopefully, hopefully more broadly across the whole industry and others.