

THE ATYPICAL CEO

Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Partner of Maddocks Michelle Dixon is different to the leaders of most major firms in several notable ways. Despite her award-winning reputation for promoting gender equity, she was reluctant to become the “first among equals” at her firm. Dixon’s greatest passion is litigation. There is nothing in life that makes her feel as “alive, engaged and happy”. So why did she agree to become CEO and what is she enjoying about the job? **JULIE MCCROSSIN** finds out.

The Sydney office of Maddocks in the city centre has the sophisticated, spacious, glass and light-filled ambience of all the major

firms. Yet the moment Michelle Dixon greets me and leads me to an interview room, her low-key warmth and natural, quiet confidence put me at ease.

“I’m not your typical CEO of a law firm,” she says. “I’m a woman. I’m public school educated. And I’m Tasmanian.”

Success at school came easily. She excelled at maths and science and thought about going into medicine or physiotherapy. “But I didn’t want to cut up a cadaver,” she recalls. She discovered that law had fewer face-to-face hours than engineering, so she enrolled in law at the University of Tasmania, intending ultimately to become an economist. Then she had a life-changing experience. “I started mooted at law school in the competitions and I loved it. I absolutely wanted to be a lawyer and a litigation lawyer,” she recalls with a joyous smile.

Two key factors gave her the confidence to pursue this dream: a supportive father and a role model of female leadership.

“I think my parents were an enormous influence on who I am, particularly my dad. My mum, Beth, was a nurse and my dad, Raoul, was in forestry. I had a sister and a brother and we were brought up in exactly the same way. We were all sent out bushwalking when we were young. We all carried our own packs. There was no difference between what my dad’s daughters and son could do. He had absolutely the same expectations.

“Then at the University of Tasmania, I had a fabulous female dean, Kate Warner. I didn’t realise it at the time but Warner was one of the first female deans of a law school.

“I think the impact of my childhood, and then having Kate as Dean, meant I never had that concern that I couldn’t do something that I wanted to do.”

Dixon still describes herself as a litigation lawyer. She has spent 18 years at Maddocks, including 13 years as a partner and a period as leader of the firm’s commercial disputes team. She was appointed interim CEO in December 2013 and confirmed as CEO in July 2014. She says she is “openly reluctant” to become the permanent CEO and intends to return to litigation.

“It wasn’t in my personal plan to move into a management role,” Dixon says. “I love being a litigation lawyer. I was happy to take on the interim CEO role but it was very, very hard for me to step away from practising.”

When I ask what she loves about being a litigator, Dixon’s face lights up and she speaks more quickly, with emotion and a few laughs, talking about strategy and tactics – and the adrenaline rush, which you don’t get as CEO.

“I am one of the few lawyers that actually loves being a lawyer,” she says. “I love the strategy. I love looking after my clients. When you look at the litigation lawyers who do it well, they are people who really want to look after their clients.

“Everyone wants to win in litigation. You always want to win. But the best result for your client might mean settling rather than seeing it through to trial. I love the intellectual element of it.”

Dixon runs commercial litigation and has traditionally worked on large cases that involve a team of lawyers, barristers and the client all pulling together to win.

Why did she agree to become the permanent CEO? Because the role would open up opportunities she had never envisaged.

“I felt really privileged to have those opportunities,” she says. “And it

could have been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I am 44. I probably would have been ready 10 years later in my career, but the opportunity came along now. I found myself enjoying the role and having the opportunity to influence various things in the business.”

What are some of the opportunities that attracted her?

“One is to influence strategy and turn it into action,” she says. “I love the big-picture side of things. Maddocks is very much a true partnership with an equal profit structure.

“I see my job as implementing the wishes of the partnership, but at the same time having a heavy influence in terms of the strategic direction of the firm, management and administrative decisions, and, in some ways, acting as the conduit between the partnership and the executive group who run the service functions and the board.”

She says one of the benefits of being a litigation lawyer is that you become very accustomed to people challenging your ideas and aren’t offended by that. You learn to see both sides of an argument to work a way through to find the best solution. “My job is to pull the information together, around big things like strategy, give my views, listen to other views, and help the decision-making process,” she says.

A recent example would be looking at who we want to be in terms of our size and jurisdiction. We agree that as a firm we don’t intend to, or have any desire to, expand to other jurisdictions at the moment. We’re currently in Victoria, NSW and the ACT. We do work in other jurisdictions but from these offices. We’d rather consolidate in the jurisdictions that we’re already practising in and build nice symbiotic relationships with other firms.



“We have no desire to build internationally. We’re a proudly domestic firm. We have a very strong public law practice – one of the best in the country – and we think it is desirable as part of that practice, and the role we have in assisting decision making and the development of public policy, that we are domestic.”

She says Maddocks’ core sectors – government, technology, education, health, infrastructure and professional services – don’t require the firm to be part of an international firm.

“At the moment we are also going through a full IT transformation project,” she says. “I wouldn’t describe myself as the most technologically aware person, but I did think our technology wasn’t where it should be. So I was able to start a process of reviewing our technology and getting the right people involved in that project. We’ve come up with what I think will bring us to the lead of the pack.

“This facilitates a whole range of other things that I want to be able to influence around diversity and flexibility that perhaps hadn’t been tackled as directly as they could have been.

“I’ve been quite vocal about gender equity, but that is just part of diversity. I think we’ve done a lot over the last couple of years about bringing women through in leadership roles. We’ve signed up to Pride in Diversity and we’ve started work on LGBTI diversity. It’s important that people feel they can be themselves at Maddocks.”

Dixon says Maddocks is also slowly tackling cultural diversity and has brought in a diversity officer who sits within the People and Culture team and reports to her and the Director of People and Culture.

“We’ve done a lot around resilience and partner resilience and looking after the health of our employees,” she says. “We’ve taken a very holistic view of the health of the business and our people.”

Dixon is a champion of the Maddocks Women initiative which she says is not about promoting women rather than men, but about making sure the right people are coming through irrespective of gender.

“The real work is in what systems you have in place to support the progression of the right

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MICHELLE DIXON

women,” she says. “I’ve learnt it has to be tackled at a number of levels and it has to be driven from the top. We have a quota for the board. There has to be not less than one woman and not less than one man. We now have 50/50 and that is the first time in our history.

“Our rate of return from maternity leave is 98 per cent. I think that is due to a number of different things. We had 100 per cent of partners and employees go through unconscious bias training. Women are now 32 per cent of our partners. We’ve got an aspirational target of 40 per cent by 2020.

“In the youngest half of our partnership, which is aged 35 to 42, over 50 per cent are women. However, 100 per cent of our executives are women and 100 per cent of our practice group heads at the moment are men. This isn’t as diverse as I want it. I believe we need the voices of both genders in the conversation to get the diversity of thinking which gives you the better business outcome.”

As the conversation draws to a close and the *LSJ* photographer starts shooting Dixon, we ponder together whether I should ask her questions about how she manages to spend enough time with her children Max, nine, Indigo, seven, and their long-term foster child, Jamie, 20. Jamie is a respite foster child who has spent weekends with Dixon and her husband, Chris, since Jamie was nine. Dixon is thrilled that Jamie, who is a talented photographer, is about to begin studies in this field.

Dixon wants to know if I would have asked the same family questions if she was a man? I tell her, “I hope so.”

As we part, I ask who would I see if I came back in five years?

“Probably someone who is exhausted, if I am the managing partner for that long,” she replies laughing ruefully.

“It is quite a demanding job and I travel a lot, which isn’t great when you have young kids. They deal with it better than me. In five years, I hope you would find someone who is still passionate about the law and who still wants to be a litigation lawyer. But also someone who has really enjoyed her time as CEO and feels she has achieved something.” **LSJ**