



Photography by Anna Bertalli. Hair and make-up by Katrina Sandberg.

## DIANA RYALL

### “I TEACH WOMEN LEADERSHIP SKILLS”

She remembers the day perfectly. “I thought I was going to die,” Diana Ryall says. “That’s your first thought when someone says you have cancer. I called my husband, Bill, to come and pick me up from the doctor’s office. I was shaking, teary, shattered.”

At the time, Diana was managing director of Apple Computer Australia, a high-flying businesswoman with a track record of innovation, efficiency and a rare ability to inspire and mentor people around her. She loved her job, loved the challenges, loved the information technology environment where she’d worked for more than 20 years. Cancer came out of nowhere.

“I was 53. I thought I was only halfway through my life, because I come from a long line of women who live beyond 100. My two sons weren’t married. I’d never held a

grandchild. There was so much still ahead.”

A regular check had picked up Diana’s tumour. “It was a small hard lump right behind the nipple of my left breast and then they found another patch which was suspicious, which meant a mastectomy. It had spread to five lymph nodes, so I also needed chemo and radiation treatment.”

That day, she called the office and started cancelling her appointments. For the six months of treatment, Diana worked part time and, when she finally returned to work, she decided it was time to move on.

Like most people who face a life-threatening disease, Diana wanted to know why it had happened to her. She picked up a book – one out of hundreds of titles at the bookshop. “I’m not really a spiritual person,” she says, “but the book [*Your Life in Your Hands*, by Jane Plant] was serendipitous. It turned out to be written by a scientist known to my husband, and it was about a woman who was told to go home and get her affairs in order because she didn’t have long to live. Not only did she live, she went on to have a fulfilling life. Not only that, on the inside front

cover was a quote from the husband of my best friend, who died in Australia from breast cancer at 37. It became my ... Bible, I suppose.

“I decided to follow the book’s advice on diet and exercise [she became a vegan for two years]. Who knows if it helped or not? But at least it gave me a sense of control, made me feel I was doing something to help myself.”

That was six years ago. Today, Diana is back in business – but at the other end of the spectrum. She has set up a company, Xplore for Success, that offers coaching and consulting programs and provides women in leadership roles with career resiliency skills. Instead of working as a leader in the corporate world, she teaches other women how to become leaders.

In the past five years, Diana’s program, which is based on mentoring small groups, has helped more than 1500 women grapple with corporate culture. “The glass ceiling may have holes, but it still exists,” she says. “And because women tend to lead by discussion and negotiation, it can be difficult for them to break through.

“I don’t know how many times I’ve heard a woman say she’s put forward an idea at a meeting, been ignored, then the same idea has been tossed on the table by a man a few minutes later and it’s been grabbed.

“Instead of beginning statements with ‘perhaps’ or ‘maybe’, women have to learn to present ideas with authority and confidence. Even the right body language – sitting up straight, looking people in the eye – can make a difference to the way you’re perceived by management.”

It is this work, she says, that gives her enormous satisfaction.

“When women call up after they’ve done the program to tell me how they’re using the skills they’ve been taught, it’s wonderful,” she says. “Making a difference is rewarding work.”

She is not, she adds, at a place in life where she thought she would be 10 years ago. Although she always knew there would be another career after her time at Apple, cancer made her realise it was important to regularly reflect on personal goals and not let life move forward without a clear direction.

“Cancer teaches you to make the most of every moment and to take nothing for granted,” she says. “It’s true that at first you think your world will shrink. But strangely, the opposite is the truth.”

