

Let's GLINC Differently About Mentoring

Gerry Lewis:

Hi everyone, and welcome to another episode of GLINC Outside the Box, I'm Gerry Lewis. Our topic today is mentoring. And by definition, a mentor is a person experienced in a particular field or has expertise, who shares the benefits of that experience with another individual often referred to as the mentee. And perhaps the famous film director and producer Steven Spielberg, said it best when he said, "The delicate balance of mentoring someone is not creating them in their own image, but giving them the opportunity to create a better version of themselves."

Gerry Lewis:

The term mentor has often been confused with that of a coach, a trainer, or even a teacher. A mentor's job in fact may include all those three elements, but their primary focus is to offer support, honest feedback, and the occasional push or pushback to the mentee. What is most important is a mentor's experience and their ability to communicate it to the mentee. Identifying a mentor let alone the right mentor or one that's available can be challenging. Organizations often struggle with setting up mentoring programs yet the research clearly shows the powerful results of having a mentor.

Gerry Lewis:

So our conversation today we'll look at how the new world of virtual has not only changed how we work and collaborate, but also how it's changing the approach and access to mentoring. My guest today is Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow. Catherine, is a human capital professional who holds a doctorate in adult education from the University of Toronto, as well as a master of education degree from Harvard University. Her career has spanned private, public, and voluntary organizations in Canada, Europe, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. She has been an advisor to different levels of government, and was most recently a member of the external advisory committee on inclusion and diversity of the Ontario Public Service. She's board chair of the largest immigrant mentorship network in Canada. Catherine, we're thrilled to have you here. Welcome.

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

Thanks very much Gerry, and it is a pleasure to be able to chat with you about a topic that I feel so passionately about, mentoring, especially in these uncertain times.

Gerry Lewis:

Very true. And by the way, happy new year to you.

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

Happy new year to you as well.

Gerry Lewis:

So we talked about... I brought up the so concept of the new world of virtual and how it's impacting mentoring, but let's just do a step back. Let's take a look and talk a bit about mentoring on how it was done traditionally, just to kind of set the context at this stage. So we'll talk about traditional mentoring and we'll talk about traditional in terms of the mentee and their roles. But let's start with a mentor. Tell me a bit about how traditional mentoring has been done from your perspective.

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

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Gerry, the whole concept of mentoring is not a new one. It has continued to be reinvented over time. In fact, if you look back at history, you will see that in years, odyssey and the work that was done by the Greeks with respect to mentoring, this has been around for decades, for centuries, millennia, yet it is still an important concept. And it's important because when we look at the origins of mentoring, the mentor is someone who is considered to be a trusted advisor. Someone who an individual can turn to as you have mentioned, to get open and honest input, feedback, guidance, whatever that word might be. And in our current day, we have taken mentoring to be one of a process in which an individual is matched with another, let's say a trusted advisor, and they would have the sort of conversations. They would have the sort of meetings that are structured specifically to address the areas that our mentee might be interested in.

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

So typically they would be pretty formal, they would be scheduled. I would say that they would be facilitated because someone would have provided an introduction, or in some instances they may be created by a mentee who directly approaches an individual to serve as a mentor. So in fact, the process has been one that has been, I would say, highly structured, context specific. It has been bound to timing in terms of how frequently an individual can be in touch with and interact with a mentor, and in some instances it's bounded by geographic location if those relationships are meant to be face-to-face. And so they could be limiting if it is guided by the type of interaction, location of interaction, and so on. So I would say that that sort of describes the conventional or what I'd call the traditional approach to being a mentor.

Gerry Lewis:

It's very interesting in terms of... Two words jumped out at me, the formality of it and the scheduled approach to it. And I even recall some executives who have said to me, "I've been asked to mentor someone and I just don't have the time for it." Or "I've been asked just to mentor someone and I don't feel it's a good match." So to me while it's definitely one of the concepts of mentoring which is so critical, it's somewhat complex. It's somewhat complex in the sense that it's difficult to orchestrate. And I think that that's what traditional mentoring while no matter how good it is as a result, it's sometimes very difficult to get started. And I think that that's why so many organizations struggle. It's not that coming up with a mentoring program is not a good idea, they do it, but it's sort of a stalled start. Have you seen that sort of in organizations where all guns blaring start a mentoring program and it just kind of dies?

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

I think you're spot on because what we're seeing in organizations I would argue is not necessarily true mentorship in the sense of it may be a mix of coaching, it may be a mix of other human capital strategies an organization will implement in essence to have an equal sharing of information, an equal sharing of advice among different levels within an organization. And I think when we think of mentorship and if we cast it back to that concept of someone who could be a trusted advisor, someone who can provide guidance, should I say where individuals have some common ground, and I think this has often been a challenge for a mentor in that there is sometimes little understanding of what is the common ground, what am I advising you on? And by the way, who are you, how are we interacting in this process?

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

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And so I think that those institutional challenges that have come about with a lack of clarification on what the mentoring process is, why a particular individual is seeking a mentor, and specifically why a mentee needs to have advice and on what specific areas. Is this about jobs, is it about careers, is it about longterm career paths and so on. So I think a number of these things have not been as specific as needed, and I think there are a lot of people who wish to be mentors. I think there's a huge opportunity for that especially in these uncertain and ambiguous times. So I think it's an opportunity to reinvent, and difficult times provide good opportunities.

Gerry Lewis:

Well, I think that's a perfect jumping off point because I think the difficult times clearly is occurring and it has changed, as I mentioned, the way we work, the way we collaborate. If you had asked someone a year and a half ago how they could work and collaborate better, they probably wouldn't have been able to describe what's happening today. Just because of necessity, you're forced into this sort of lane and it works because you know it has to work. How has mentoring change then in the virtual world? We say that in the traditional world it was very kind of orchestrated, somewhat restrictive, oftentimes unmatched. How has the virtual world changed that?

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

I think the virtual world provides an interesting opportunity. Some would say it's a challenge. I see it as an opportunity because we are somewhat boundaryless. We are not hemmed in to a particular institutional framework where we need to have a meeting at a particular place or at a particular time. The virtual environment allows us to reach out to people who are beyond the organizations, who are within communities that we would not normally visit or necessarily have an interaction with. When you think of the environment in which we can now have a real time, should I say simulated in-person conversation, whether it's Zoom, Teams, or whatever we're choosing to use, that would open up new opportunities for having important conversations with people who could be mentors.

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

And let me give you an example of what I mean by that. I think good mentorships should begin with the mentor and mentee having some common ground, some common area of interest. My area of interest for example is human capital. And human capital spans organizations, countries, jurisdictions. And so if I were to seek a mentor at this point in time, for me it would be to identify an individual who may be in a similar situation and role that I'm in, where I may want to understand how that individual is tackling some of the challenges that we face in terms of let's say career management, which is the era I'm in, in a different jurisdiction outside of my organization, outside of Ontario, possibly outside of Canada to seek guidance, to get information, to share, to have a dialogue. And I think this opportunity that the virtual world provides is that these can be activated almost seamlessly. And I don't necessarily have to travel to a different location to establish that sort of mentor mentee advisor support.

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

So I think this environment is a fantastic one. One might say that there's so much uncertainty, there's so much ambiguity, how do we navigate this? What a fantastic opportunity we have now to use the same thing that is perceived to be problematic, to be one that can gain support for individuals wherever they are in the world, and basically to seek advice and to seek mentors in areas and regions that we would not have thought of before.

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Gerry Lewis:

Right. So it's very interesting because... And when we talked about traditional mentoring, you talked about matching someone. And it was almost like a third party having to make that match. Whereas what I'm hearing from you is that with the virtual world, the gates are wide open in the sense that you can tap in. So it's interesting also because I had a conversation with someone just before the holidays, and we were talking about this individual and they were struggling with let's just say a confidence issue. And one of the questions I asked her was, "Well, is there anyone who you would want to talk to that could help you understand what they do really well because you look up to them?" And it's interesting because she said, "Well, yes, actually there is." But she's all the way in Ireland. And so right away I said, "So what's the barrier?" And she cut herself because the fact that she said that they were in Ireland, at first seemed like, "Well, I can't. How would I do this?" Then suddenly she realized after she said it, wait a second, there's nothing stopping me from contacting this individual. So I think it's just the awareness that things are much wider open now. And I think that's the real benefit of the virtual world, would you say?

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

Absolutely. And I think that when we hemmed into an organizational approach to mentoring, we get locked into the hierarchical barriers, should I put it that way, that restrict us at one level being able to reach out to someone who is two or three levels above us in the hierarchy to be able to say, "What are your thoughts on this? I have some challenges that I'm experiencing. What would you advise? How should I approach?" And so I think the hierarchical barriers within an organization sometimes may limit an individual's comfort and a sense of, should I say confidence, that the discussion that I'm having with you is guidance, and would not necessarily be, should I say, use against me in the future.

Gerry Lewis:

Right.

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

And I think this virtual world allows us to be able to move beyond those institutional barriers if I could put it that way, to tap into individuals who can provide that guidance, which can help me excel in my own organization and to get that in a timely manner. I don't have to wait for years to be able to do this. What I might need to do now is to structure a really good email outreach to that person.

Gerry Lewis:

We're going to talk about how do we outreach to that individual a little bit later on. But what I wanted to jump on first was I loved your term tapping in because if you compare that to what we talked about, traditional, where it was scheduled, it becomes a much more restrictive way of really getting to someone. Whereas if you look at the virtual world and your ability to just tap in, get your advice on something, it makes it that much more fluid, a little bit easier to get ahold of that individual to get there whether it's five minutes, 10 minutes, 15 minutes, whatever. I think that's the real power. So for me, the virtual world has the gates are open, the hierarchy is compressed, and the need for scheduling is somewhat eased because it's more about tapping in, finding the right time. And of course we are going to get to this, to how do you actually approach an individual, because that is still key.

Gerry Lewis:

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But before we do that, I want to jump to... We talked about traditional and virtual mentors. Let's take a moment to talk about traditional virtual mentee because we all know whether it's coaching, training, mentoring, it is not just a one-sided role. There are two very critical roles, the mentor's and the mentee's. Let's talk about the mentee. Traditional role of the mentee. What has their traditional role been? What have they been asked to do?

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

The traditional role of a mentee has been one in which they are seeking in some instances, guidance on careers, seeking information specifically if you're in an educational environment on how one approaches navigating a post-secondary institution as an example, in the workplace, navigating careers within the organization between businesses or between geographical locations. So there has been a lot of emphasis with the mentee seeking information on very specific areas of, should I say progress, very specific information around process, and how one, should I say deals with if it's a hierarchical organization, political issues within an organization. So they have been very specific and I would argue they've been very tactical.

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

The real opportunity I think, going forward, and it is not just for a virtual environment, it's about being a lot more strategic. I think if this pandemic has highlighted anything, it is that we need as individuals to hone not just our technical capabilities and understand how we find individuals who can help us to utilize and excel in our areas of technical focus, but how do we develop ourselves in terms of our interpersonal capabilities, our ability to use and apply best principles in terms of working in teams, negotiating, persuading, and some of those other capabilities that are key for success irrespective of what environment that you in. And I think that's an opportunity taking a move from the traditional, what I would call tactical approach, to a more strategic and a more mindful approach as to the type of support that you need from a mentor.

Gerry Lewis:

Very interesting point. When you say tactical I'm reflecting on conversations I've had with previous mentors of my own, where the situation is often about going from point A to point B, right?

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gerry Lewis:

I am currently a manager of this area, I want to manage a larger area. I've been told that I'm not quite ready yet. What do I need to do to get to that next level? So it's a point A to point B approach. When you say strategic, tell me a bit more about what you mean by strategic. You talked about being more mindful. What are some of the competencies you think are important for the mentee to keep in mind beyond going from point A to point B. Still very valid I'm sure when you're talking to a mentor, but what are some of the broader things we should be considering from a strategic perspective?

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

When you look at the role of a mentee, and you have captured it well when you talk about going from point A to point B. If that's what you need to understand, you don't need a mentor. You need someone who could just give you career advice, or educational advice, or whatever those specific things might be.

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When I think of a mentee especially in this environment and going forward, and when I use the word strategic in their approach, it is that the mentee needs to do much more work in understanding their own strengths, their own capabilities, possibly their areas of weakness to do more work on self-assessment, build greater self-awareness so that when you are having a conversation with a mentor, it's not about how do I get from A to B, how do you continue to grow and develop? And in that approach, you're also looking for mentees who are developing competencies in the areas of discernment.

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

How does one navigate this current environment where there is so much uncertainty? It's no longer just whether you're able to work in teams. It's no longer whether you're just able to communicate effectively with someone who is in a multidimensional project. It is about how do you build that ability to analyze uncertain information, unstructured information. How do you bring your strengths and capabilities about process and begin to create a new path for yourself? And I think that a mentee needs to demonstrate more of those higher order, strategic thinking, strategic process around themselves and not seek a mentor until you've done that. Because the mentor cannot help you if you have not taken the time to be self-aware, discerning, and taking ownership of what it is you'd want to be able to do. And if you have done that and then you need guidance, you need advice, that mentor is able to truly help you because you have done the groundwork. And so I see the mentee mentor relationship going forward as a really critical partnership, but each person would have had to do their own thinking or have their own process in place before that dialogue can begin.

Gerry Lewis:

One of the competencies that you see a lot in organizations now that you did not see, I would say even five years ago, Catherine, is curiosity. And that is... To me what you've just described is this, for the mentees perspective to be very curious. So not just point A to point B. So that's very tactical. Curious would tell me what do I need to do better in, how do I improve X. These are curiosity questions. So would that be something from a... if you were giving advice to a mentee in terms of having a conversation with their mentor, that curiosity is a very big part of this, and what would you tell them.

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

Absolutely. Navigating uncertain times, navigating unstructured information. We look at the pandemic and there has been so much discussion about which sectors have been negatively impacted from a business economic development perspective, have been impacted in terms of the workforce and the need for specific skills and capabilities. They have been negatively impacted. If you are navigating this environment now, curiosity has to be at the top of your list because if some things have disappeared or are at risk because of the pandemic, you should be asking yourself, "So what's on the rise? Because wherever there is a negative, you can bet there is a growth in some other area. I would argue that given that what we're facing now is a major health challenge globally, what's being done in areas such as health analytics, what's being done in eras such as public health and others? And there will be so many downstream opportunities just given the environment that we are in.

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

So it's no longer simply to sit back and say, "Oh, my sector has been impacted." Or, "The choice of path that I had before maybe at risk." It is to ask the questions. If this is at risk, then what are those other areas that could be on the rise? And that sense of curiosity, that sense of wanting to do the research, to do some scans of different sectors, just to understand where the growth opportunities might be, are

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important not only for individuals within an organization, but it's important for us to be able to navigate and to begin to have ownership of where we go and not be, should I say, having the change done to us, but we managing that change and being very mindful and being very deliberate about it.

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

So to your point, I would see curiosity being a top competency whether you are within an organization that is highly structured, a smaller organization, it really doesn't matter. But it is again pointing to that strategic mindful approach of being more self-aware, being able to articulate where you're good at, what you're good at, and how you can leverage those capabilities in any sector.

Gerry Lewis:

Excellent. And you know what, what I drew from here was from a mentee's perspective, obviously, curiosity, we just talked about it. The self-awareness is I think what you just mentioned. It's so important because it's very comfortable feeling good about what you're good at, and we often shy away from things we're not so good at. And I think what this pandemic has taught us is that we need to be able to embrace things that are very uncomfortable even within ourselves. We have to embrace it. If we close our eyes and hope it goes away, it's not going to go away. So curiosity, self-awareness, and I think the third one is not new. It's ownership. It's you have to take an active role in this and not wait for the mentor to basically from a traditional way, tell you what you need to do. You need to own the entire process. So curiosity, self-awareness, ownership. Those are the three things as a mentee we must have.

Gerry Lewis:

Let's jump to our final part which is we talked about the gates being wide open, there is really no borders to reaching out to mentors, tapping in versus scheduling formality. But still there has to be an outreach. There has to be an initial step made by likely the mentee I would imagine. How would one even begin going about that? What's your advice on that?

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

Gerry, this is such a wonderful question quite frankly, because we often think that there is some magic to this outreach when in fact, I would say it's a very, again, not to overuse the word, strategic approach that could be used. In preparing for this session I had three individuals reach out to me seeking a mentor. And I was struck by one thing that was common to them all. They clearly thought about how they present themselves to me because I have no idea who these individuals are. I had no contact, and there is no one I can turn to and ask, "Do you know, or could you give me some advice?"

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

And this happens in an organization. This would have happened in the traditional approach of someone referring you to someone else. So here we are blank slate, I don't know who these individuals are. They have reached out to me. And I mentioned the need to use a very well-structured email. In some areas we hear people reaching out to people who could potentially be mentors on things like LinkedIn and other forms of technology, and I would argue that in some instances there is a certain level of fatigue with being approached, should I say, in using different formats on technologies.

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

I like the old time approach. Draft a proper email. Craft a well done message. Clearly identify what you are reaching out to gain insights on. So obviously, you should have done some research, you should have

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done your self analysis, you should have done your awareness. You should have identified the areas of ownership that you are going to be responsible for and indicate that in your message. And by the way, this is a short message. It's not preset. And indicate that, "I'm seeking advice on." Very specific. And I can tell you I responded to the three individuals who approached me. And I tell you what made me respond. They all had done and indicated what they have done in their careers, where they are, and specifically what are their life information needs in terms of development opportunities, market access to different types of rules, and so on. Very specific. And they also indicated very specifically what sort of information they'd like to have from me.

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

So I'm made sense of what I can do to support those individuals. I feel confident in responding to them because they have done the legwork. I don't need to do a leg work if I'm the mentor, the mentee has to have done that. So I think a well-structured email is the approach to use it. It can't be too long because we are inundated with all forms of technology at the moment, and it has to have those differentiating abilities to help that mentor say, "Okay, I will have a contact with this individuals." If you just send, "Here's my LinkedIn," I think you would not get a response.

Gerry Lewis:

Well, thank you for that. And I think that it goes back to something I was taught a long time ago, when you're asking for help of someone is to always know what is your ask.

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

That's correct.

Gerry Lewis:

What are you asking for? Because I sense from what you're telling me is that if the three individuals basically just wrote to you and said, "I would like you, Catherine, to be my mentor." It's too generic. Whereas if there's a specific, here's where I'm having difficulty, here's what I done, here's what I'm looking for, my ask of you is this. And what they've done with that ask from what I gathered is something you said earlier, which was they found common ground with you. Because if that ask was not within your realm, you would be very quick to say, "Listen, I'd love to help you. Not really within my wheelhouse, but here's somewhere you might want to look."

Gerry Lewis:

So what I sense from what's important in this message to you or to a mentor is number one, do the research. Give enough of a bio of you that the individual mentor can get to know you. And it doesn't have to be very long. It can be just telling a snippet of what you've gone through will give enough color to that. But the most important thing is to have the ask so that the mentor can actually process, "Can I help?" And I think that's what probably prompted you to help them.

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

That's correct. And we talked about the mentee doing research on their own needs and identifying specifically what it is that they would like to have advice on. I was truly impressed that they also did that research on my background. So wherever they got the information and indicated specifically, "Because of you, I have noticed your work in this particular area. My need is to get information on..." That was common ground immediately. If someone had come to me and said, "I really want to know about

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biomedical physics." I would tell them, "Let me try and refer you to someone." So I think that common ground to be able to begin to have a meaningful conversation is critical, and it demonstrates to me that these individuals have given thought, great thought to what it is they would like to grow into, what it is that they would like to become, and have tied that to things that I've done and gave very specific areas that they would like to look at. And by the way, they also gave a very specific amount of time.

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

Some individuals have said, "A quick 10 to 15 minute conversation," others have said, "If you wouldn't mind initiating by email to let me know this is a possibility." So I think it is very clear next steps for the mentor to tick. Either way I have to communicate. I was asked whether I would communicate on the availability for that, let's say 10 minute meeting or for a follow-up email. So be sure that you activate that email to be able to get a response.

Gerry Lewis:

Excellent. So research, have an ask, have a time request. And I think if I could wrap all this up into what that message needs to be, you basically need to earn the right to be the mentee. And in order to earn that right, it's kind of going through the research, the ask, and the time, to make it easy for the mentor to say, "Yes."

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

That's correct.

Gerry Lewis:

Catherine, I could go on talking with you about this forever. Our time is up, but I very much, I very much appreciate your time and obviously your insight. The breadth and depth of that is incredible, and I'm sure our listeners are going to really get a lot out of this interview. A couple of quotes I wanted to share, "So mentoring is a brain to pick, an ear to listen, and a push in the right direction." And I think that that to me was a nice capsule of what mentoring is. And a final quote I wanted to share is an anonymous quote but it said that, "We all need someone who inspires us to do better than we know." And I think that's the power of mentoring, someone who actually believes in you more than you currently do, who sees it in you. Catherine, you've been a mentor to me so I thank you as well, and it's been wonderful talking with you today.

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow:

Gerry, it's always a pleasure to be working with you. And I think the current environment that we're in, we need these types of messages to get out to as many people as possible so that they can take ownership, be positive, and navigate this environment. We can all come out of this with very favourable comes, but we have to take charge of that process. So thanks so much for doing this to help so many people out there. It's fantastic.

Gerry Lewis:

Thanks for listening to another episode of GLINC Outside the Box. I'm Gerry Lewis.