

Let's GLINC Differently About Courage

Gerry Lewis:

Hi everyone. Welcome to another episode of GLINC Outside the Box. I'm Gerry Lewis. Our theme this month is courage, specifically courage as a leader. While there's a range of workplace competencies that characterizes effective leadership, such as leading an organization through change or crisis, managing multiple and multi-level stakeholders, and even communicating to inspire the entire workforce, there are also key emotional traits and behaviors that leaders today need to access and nurture in order to bring out the best in themselves and others. Among those traits is courage. "A courageous leader is an individual who's capable of making themselves better and stronger when the stakes are high and the circumstances turn against them," says Harvard Business School professor Nancy Cohen.

Gerry Lewis:

Now, mustering the courage to lead is not new, and certainly this past year we've had lots of practice. So what aspects of courageous leadership are we exploring today? In a recent Harvard Business Review article, Courageous Leadership Characteristics, they list a number of critical traits of courageous leaders that I'm going to explore with my guest. Speaking of my guest, I'm thrilled to have with me today, not only a great guest, but a longtime friend as well. I've known and worked with Rania Llewellyn for well over a decade and was thrilled when she agreed to sit down with me today to talk about this very topic of courage. Rania is the president and CEO of Laurentian Bank. She's the first woman to lead a major chartered bank in Canada. So I couldn't think of a better guest to help us explore the topic of courageous leadership. Rania, welcome and great to have you join us for this episode of GLINC Outside the Box.

Rania Llewellyn:

Thank you, Gerry, for having me. I'm super excited to partake in this podcast.

Gerry Lewis:

Great. Let's start a conversation then with there are several traits mentioned I talked about in the Harvard Business Review, but three in particular I like to kind of unpack with you today. They are authenticity, resilience and emotional intelligence. Let's start with authenticity. Simon Sinek has a quote, "Authenticity is more than speaking. Authenticity is about doing and every decision we make says something about who we are as a leader." Tell me a bit about how you view authenticity and how we make it a practice as a leader.

Rania Llewellyn:

Yeah. So what I would say is actually that's one of probably the most important traits is being an authentic leader. I think it starts by being self-aware. So what makes you who you are. I think you have to dig deep and really be self-aware to know who you are because as you grow and you mature, whether it's professionally or personally, you're going to get feedback and advice and counsel from lots and lots of different people. So to be authentic, you have to be true to your core values, and so that starts with being self-aware. So I know personally speaking from experience, particularly in your professional life and being an immigrant, being a woman, being from a diverse background, having lived in many different countries, you always kind of stand out because you think different, you behave differently and you're constantly seeking advice and counsel on how you can be better.

Rania Llewellyn:

But what you realize as you mature is that people come at it from their own personal perspectives and so it's really important to start with self-awareness. So once you have that, I mean, that's one thing I tell

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people is I always want to be able to look myself in the mirror and say, "Yeah, that's still me. That's still Rania." So to put that in practice, I think people confuse the two. I think you have to start by being vulnerable. I think being courageous and being vulnerable go hand in hand, and I think that's one of the most important traits. I think if anything, COVID has given us almost an opportunity to be vulnerable by being empathetic and being human, because we're all facing the same challenge at the same time versus pre-COVID, people are facing different challenges at different times. But now we have a common challenge that we're all facing.

Rania Llewellyn:

So I think it's a great way to practice as a leader vulnerability. You've got your ups and you've got your downs. One thing I share openly with my leadership team that I've struggled with for many years is that imposter syndrome. I graduated from high school when I was 14 so going to university being so young. So in your head, you're constantly that little person that has to prove to everybody that you belong. So being aware of that, I'm always self-aware of that. So I'm comfortable in terms of starting by saying, "Okay, I've got an imposter syndrome," so I constantly have to deal with that, and then it opens up a conversation because it allows others to come and start being vulnerable with you as well. Once you become vulnerable, you start getting more comfortable in your own skin, because being authentic ultimately is just bringing your whole self to work, bringing your whole self to whatever it is that you're applying yourself to.

Gerry Lewis:

That's great. You've hit so many key words, but I love the word about vulnerability because I think it's so hard sometimes to be able to let go of that to be able to express it. I think that it talks about the vulnerability is sort of to be able to admit to share your uncertainties and to kind of let people know what and how much you may not know. It's okay. It's okay to do that. I love the still me part, I'm in a mirror because we've heard that before. I got to look myself in the mirror, but I love that sort of second part to looking at yourself in the mirror is, am I still me, love that.

Gerry Lewis:

Let's explore a little bit about the second one, resilience. If there was really ever a year that tested this these past couple of years have really tested everyone's resilience. Many would agree that resilience isn't something everyone intrinsically possesses. It's a learned capability that leaders can hone with experience. So tell me a little bit about your path leading up to where you are today that taught you how to become more of a resilient leader.

Rania Llewellyn:

Yeah, so I would say the people who are probably most resilient are people who go through significant changes in their life. So whether it's going through a war or going through COVID, I think you start building that as a muscle and it goes back to being self-aware. So what are some of the triggers and some of those things that happen? So I would say personally speaking, thinking back immigrating to Canada was probably that first step into being aware of the importance of resiliency. So I'm a middle child. I have an older brother and a younger sister. It's interesting how immigrating to Canada, the experiences that I think my parents were probably the most courageous, I think anyone that immigrates to a new country, starting a new life with kids with a hope of a better future, are probably the most courageous people.

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Rania Llewellyn:

So when I actually looked back at my parents, I think that they were way more courageous than some of the things that I've done. But the resiliency of wanting to... It's easy to put your head in the sand and say, "Okay, you know what, I'm beaten up. I'm not going to be able to get over that." I think different people respond differently. So some people do that. So I would say immigrating to Canada was probably one of those key moments where it was like, "Okay, my parents gave up everything. So failure is not an option," right? So every time something knocks you down, you just kind of brush it off and you get up and you say, "Okay, how am I going to overcome that?" So I would say that was probably a very defining moment.

Rania Llewellyn:

Then I would say there were a number throughout my career, whether it was leaving Halifax, coming to Toronto, it's not immigration, but my husband and I came to Toronto to know a single soul, started a new career here. Didn't even know how we were going to make rent. But it was one of those things where as you start experiencing things, you start looking back on those experiences and say, "Okay, I went through that so I think I can go through this." So you start building these skills that make you more and more resilient. So it allows you to then think, "Okay, I can take more bolder moves." That's what I tell my kids is every time they come across an obstacle or a challenge, dig deep and remember how you were able to overcome it last time and try to build on that skillset. Because I do think if life has been too easy or things have come a little too easy for you, you don't build that muscle of resilience. So if you're too comfortable, I personally think you don't build that muscle of being resilient as a leader.

Gerry Lewis:

You've perfectly illustrated something I was just going to wrap this up with was that resilience is the capacity to not only endure great challenges, which is what you described, but also to get stronger in the midst of it. So you didn't just survive it. You actually, as a result of it, got stronger. You mentioned something quite I chuckled because resilience is a quote here, it says, "Resilience is getting knocked down seven times, but you're standing up for the eighth."

Rania Llewellyn:

Well maybe that's because I enjoy boxing.

Gerry Lewis:

But it's amazing. But resilience is that getting up that extra time and you're absolutely right, it makes you stronger each time as well.

Rania Llewellyn:

Gerry, you know my favorite song is What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger. I listen to that quite a bit because it's true, what doesn't kill you will make you stronger for sure.

Gerry Lewis:

Absolutely. You know what, just on a personal note and probably why we are friends is the way you view your parents and their bravery of coming to Canada is the exact same sentiment I have for mine. There was absolutely no reason for them to come here except to better our lives and what sacrifice is that. So I think that's probably why we're such good friends. Our third trait that we're going to unpack

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today is emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is probably more important than ever in helping leaders mobilize their teams in this period of prolonged uncertainty. Now, lots have been said, lots of books have been written about emotional intelligence, lots of definitions out there. But what I like in particular comes from the Cambridge English Dictionary, which is the ability to understand the way people feel and react and to use this skill to make good judgements and to avoid or solve problems. I like it because it really encapsulates what emotional intelligence is. So my question Rania then is how has emotional intelligence helped you with leading teams in both good and challenging times?

Rania Llewellyn:

Yeah. So if I were to boil it down, it doesn't matter what business you're in, what your occupation is, ultimately we're in the people business. It's all about interactions with people. I've been so fortunate coming from different cultural backgrounds, living in many different countries, being an outsider, always feeling different is always taking that extra step of trying to understand other people's perspectives. It's easy to judge. It's easy to see things at a very just on the surface rather than truly kind of peeling that onion. So I think it's very important for leaders to truly understand what makes people tick. So if you boil it down to leadership, ultimately, I truly believe leadership is about serving our employees. So how do I help you be a better version of you? How do I help you outperform and reach new heights? The only way I can do that is if I truly understand, when are you most excited? What makes you outperform? When are you at your very best?

Rania Llewellyn:

So understanding how do you want to be recognized? How do you want to be engaged? It's not one size fits all. So during the good times, that really helps with coaching, development, working on a development plan with our leaders, and so it's absolutely important to have that emotional intelligence. I mean, at the end of every call, even now, I always say, "What can I do to help? Is there something I can do more?" Right? I constantly ask for feedback as well, because when you ask for feedback, then there's an opportunity to say, "Well, now, can I give you feedback as well?" I actually tell my leaders, "The minute I stopped giving you feedback is the minute that you need to figure out I've stopped investing in you." So feedback is definitely a gift.

Rania Llewellyn:

During challenging times, I would say, is even more important, but I think it's more the empathetic leadership that becomes really important. Different people are experiencing very different challenges. Those who are living alone or those who are living in little, confined spaces or those who have anxiety, those who have mental health issues. So I think during COVID, having that emotional intelligence is even more critical. So the leadership skills that you look for are slightly different. It becomes a little bit more heightened, particularly as it prolongs. So I think now more than ever, emotional intelligence is an absolute critical leadership skill that we all need to hone and constantly be testing. Then it goes back, it ties back to the last two things that we talked about.

Rania Llewellyn:

So starting by being vulnerable and sharing allows other people to then kind of share. Then you kind of build on that common theme so that you can help coach and develop people going forward. But yeah, it's absolutely critical because a lot of times people say something, but if you don't ask more questions to understand where they're coming from, you're not really addressing the root cause or the root issue, which makes it harder to then kind of fine tune or coach and develop people appropriately.

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Gerry Lewis:

I think understanding how people tick is probably a very nice way of putting emotional intelligence into practice, to really listen and to kind of understand where it's coming from. Rania, you and I exchanged Netflix shows periodically and your reference to asking how you can help reminds me of what I'm watching now, which is *New Amsterdam*. I don't know if you've seen it. Yeah. It's amazing. The main character, his line and no matter what thing he is going through that day, he'll say to the person in front of him or her, "How can I help? How can I help?" I think that is such a powerful line that it's making me think all the time about it's not just about me and what I'm going through, how can I help you, because that ultimately is going to make everyone better.

Gerry Lewis:

So, anyway, let's shift gears a little bit. We've talked about the three critical traits of courageous leaders, authenticity, resilience, emotional intelligence, each helping leaders think, say, and do the right things at the right time. So let's shift gears. I want to talk a little bit about how you've navigated through some of your own courageous moments along your career. Tell me about a time when you felt you really needed to dig deep into what I call the courage well, to either get something done or make something happen. Help me understand your courageous moment in that path.

Rania Llewellyn:

So Gerry, I'm watching *New Amsterdam* as well. So I love that line. I had used it before, but now I use it all the time. So just moving on to this question, though, listen, I've had lots of challenges throughout my career and throughout my life, but maybe I'll kind of hone in on a couple. One of them was early on in my career, and now it's almost a blessing that it was early on in my career. I was advised that I was not doing a great job and I had 90 days to find myself another role, otherwise, I was going to be let go. So that's something that actually happened to me that there's two ways of doing it, again, like I said, you can kind of put your head in the sand and just kind of wallow over it. Or what I did was like, okay, this isn't an option. So at the time I was married, I told my husband, "You know what, this city is too small for us." We were in Halifax at the time. "I'm not seeing a lot of opportunities. So let's just pack up our bags and move to Toronto."

Rania Llewellyn:

We didn't have a place to stay. We bunked with a friend. We didn't have a job. We both came. We started networking like crazy. I actually accepted a maternity leave position, which was a nine month contract. I kept networking like crazy until I landed a job. So I would say that was one of the places where I didn't let fear kind of overcome... I found fear actually powered me forward in terms of that fear of we need an income. I remember telling my husband, Sean, "Just find any job because we both just need to pay for rent. I feel confident we'll eventually find something that will be a longer term." So I would say that was definitely one where I had to dig deep and go from there based on a trigger that happened to me.

Rania Llewellyn:

But another one that I would say is just as important is when you make the choice of being courageous. So that job that I did ultimately get in Toronto was to be a corporate banker and I loved it. It was one of those roles where I could truly be, the environment, the cultural fit was perfect so I could truly be authentic. I can just bring my whole self to work. So I had no intention of ever leaving that business. I was entrepreneurial. I was aggressive. All the things that I was told in the past were not good traits to

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have really suited my role. But then I was presented with an opportunity where I was seconded. I worked on a strategic paper and it was around how do we attract more new immigrants to our bank. Given being an immigrant, it was near and dear to my heart. But I went on that program thinking I'm going to do a good job and then I'm going to go back to corporate banking.

Rania Llewellyn:

Then when I was actually presented with the job to lead this new unit, I had to think long and hard about, okay, what are the pros? What are the cons? I've never been in the retail banking side. I'm a corporate banker. I'm in a good place. I have a great sponsor. So why leave? Then I said, "Well, why not?" Right? So the question I'd constantly tell people is, "Will you regret not doing something and look back and say, I wish I could"? If the answer is yes, then you should just move forward. So I jumped in and I tell people the first six months were the longest six months of my life. I used to go home almost crying every day saying, "What have I done?" But it was, again, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I grew in leaps and bounds in such a short period of time.

Rania Llewellyn:

I had to build a department from scratch. I had to recruit. I had to have my own budget. It was all things that I had never done before. What was interesting is the bank had tried doing it before and so I had a lot of naysayers saying, "Yeah, we tried doing it before and it didn't work." That's one thing that I've realized is a trigger for me to say, "Well, watch me do it," is don't say that we've tried it before and it didn't work. Because I do believe there's not a lot of net new ideas, but timing is important and execution is critical. That was the place where I learned the importance of leadership, how do you surround yourself by diverse employees, people who kind of cover your blind spots.

Rania Llewellyn:

So I learned a lot about leadership by actually taking that courageous move. Now, I'm a big believer that the more you move, the more you become self-aware and the more you actually build on resilience and you keep honing your leadership skills. So I would say those would be the two that were critical moves in my career that have kind of defined me from that perspective.

Gerry Lewis:

Well, the first story is something that happened to you and the second story is really something you made happen. So I think both of them, you really had to dig deep to get to that. I would be remiss to not ask you about is there... Those are two fantastic situations that you've gone through that demonstrated sort of how you've built this courage for yourself. But would there be one where it was a defining moment that you could look back and say, "I am who I am today because of that. That's where it all started. That was the watershed moment for me." Is there one of those?

Rania Llewellyn:

Yeah. So when I look back, and a lot of people can't believe it when I say, but I was a very shy kid growing up, right? So anybody who knows me now is like, "You're an extrovert. You talk all the time. You have no issues speaking up and finding your voice." Those closest to me would know that I was extremely shy. I was the kid in class who was like, "Oh, please don't pick on me." I'd never put my hand up. Then life happens to you. So I would say when I came to Canada, I finished my education. I got a Canadian degree, but I didn't have a Canadian name that was easily pronounced. I started applying for jobs and I kept getting these rejection letters. So as you can see, I have no accent and I don't look any

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different than any Canadian or North American, but yet my name was on those applications and I just couldn't get that first interview.

Rania Llewellyn:

So at our swearing in ceremony with my family, I was fortunate enough that at the time, the head of the bank that I joined was there. My mom basically told me to go up there and ask him for a job. Again, I was just like, "This isn't really the right place to do that." But that was when I said, "You know what, I have nothing to lose." It's at that moment where you're like, "Okay, you know what, I really have nothing to lose." So I found my voice and I went up and I introduced myself and basically said, "This is where I want to work. This is why you should hire me." It was interesting because that's how I got my first break. So once you do that, then you realize, you need to find your voice. You need to have the courage.

Rania Llewellyn:

So one piece of advice I always tell my kids, "You don't ask, you don't get." What's the worst thing that can happen? People can say no. But if you don't try, you will actually never know what the answer is, because more times than you think, the answer is likely a yes or a maybe or let me find out more, can we talk a little bit more about it. So I would say that was probably one of the most defining courageous moments because you kind of go back to that to say, "Okay, what's the worst thing that can happen?"

Gerry Lewis:

Well, and in fact that that was the moment you found your voice. I think that that is perhaps one of the most powerful gifts you can get when you believe in your voice and you'll see things happen. I think this is the perfect segue because you talked about the word advice. My final question, which I actually rephrased into advice is what advice would you like to share with our listeners in actions they can and they should do every day to kind of help them become more courageous as individuals, as colleagues, as managers, especially as we're coming out of this period of uncertainty? What would you say, practice this to become more courageous?

Rania Llewellyn:

So I would say start with self-awareness. I think we started the conversation in the podcast, Gerry, with being self-aware. So take stock of who you are to begin with so that you can be true to who you are. Then I would say I've taken risks, but they've all been calculated risks. So one advice I give people when they're thinking of changing jobs is, you know what, you should be able to do 50% of the job. The other 50% is really your growth and development opportunity. So when you actually look at a job description or an opportunity, you don't have to be able to do all of it, because if you do, then you're probably already doing it. So where's the growth in that?

Rania Llewellyn:

So take calculated risks. So if you're a leader, when you're interviewing people, right, make sure that you're hiring for behaviors. Then obviously, from a technical skill perspective, that they maybe bring 50% of it to the job, and then the rest of it is the development and coaching opportunity. If you're someone that's looking and you're the applicant, you're the employee that's applying, yeah, so take calculated risks because without taking risks and getting out of your comfort zone, you're never going to grow, right? So I've seen patterns where there are some people who continue dreaming about what they want to do, but they don't do anything about it. So I would say stop dreaming and start doing. That's the only

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way that you're going to grow and be courageous and really test your resiliency and your ability to... How far can you go? I think the sky's the limit. You're the only person holding yourself back.

Gerry Lewis:

Absolutely. I think that once you take that step forward, things begin to happen. Rania, like I said at the start, I've known you for over a decade and you're not only courageous, you're also very humble because you didn't mention something you're doing at work, which I think is phenomenal in helping others really have these courageous conversations. You've started something at Laurentian Bank where you have instituted a whole courageous conversations initiative. Just talk a little bit about that, because I think that, to me, not only are you giving advice, you're actually helping others mobilize that sense of courage. Tell me a bit about that.

Rania Llewellyn:

Yeah. So I wanted to help others find their voice and have that sense of we belong here. So our employee base at Laurentian Bank and in many other institutions, I mean, Canada is based on immigration, is diversity and inclusion. I think institutions have done extremely well on the diversity side, but I always say diversity is just a statistic, right? Versus inclusion is an action. So how do we give our employees a voice? It starts by giving them a voice, and then for those who may not come from diverse backgrounds or from different backgrounds, how can they get educated on that different and diverse background. So we wanted to start off with creating that platform and then underneath the platforms, there's a black group that has been formed. There'll likely be a women group. There'll also be an LGBTQ group.

Rania Llewellyn:

It's all grassroots initiatives, but it starts by bringing people together both from that group, as well as allies and people who are leaders to start by understanding different perspectives. I think what has happened, I would say with the we movement in particular is people have not necessarily changed the way they think, but the way they talk or behave, because they're worried that they're going to get judged. So the advice I give people in terms of having these courageous conversations is, and I openly talk about it, is I'll never know what it's like to be a man. You'll never know what it's like to be a woman. So let's start by having a conversation and let me try to walk you through my shoes. So the thing I can do is try to explain to you, but not get defensive if you disagree with me, but let's have a conversation.

Rania Llewellyn:

So we need to have more of those courageous conversations, because I know everyone's doing all this unconscious bias training, but unless you tell me how you truly feel or how you truly think, I won't be able to influence you or have a conversation where I can change your perspective. I'm a big believer that to learn, you need to actually listen and you need to understand other people's perspective, help me understand, and if it comes from a place of real need of understanding, we're going to be able to overcome these differences and create a very inclusive environment, which will generate innovation and ultimately generate revenues and results for everybody.

Gerry Lewis:

Well, I think it's a awesome initiative and I can't wait to hear more about it. I wish I could encapsulate everything that you said in this last half hour, 40 minutes into a few things, and I cannot because there are so many amazing things you shared with us. But one thing I do take away that's distilled from what

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you said at the beginning and what you covered off at the end about self-awareness is that courage is knowing your north star and regularly checking it to make sure you're still headed there. I think that to me epitomizes everything that you just shared with me today. The other one is, and it's a quote, and I believe it's from Winston Churchill, but I'm not 100% sure because it's been debated whether he said this or not, but I still find it very useful, and that is, "Success is not final. Failure is not fatal. It is courage that continues to count."

Gerry Lewis:

I think that that also summarizes everything you talked about as well. It's just that ongoing courage that's very powerful. Rania, I cannot thank you enough for taking some time with me today to share your experience, your insights, your thoughts, and your perspective. It was great talking to you today.

Rania Llewellyn:

Thank you, Gerry, for having me. Thank you for being a wonderful friend. Thank you for having me on the podcast.

Gerry Lewis:

You've been listening to GLINC Outside the Box. Thanks everyone for joining us today. I'm Gerry Lewis.