



CAREERS



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Gerri Sinclair: 'The freedom I was given shaped me'

Managing director at Kensington Capital Partners discusses her love for mentoring and recalls the best advice she has ever received

BRENDA BOUW

THE LADDER

Gerri Sinclair is a managing director at Kensington Capital Partners and leader of its Vancouver office, where she's in charge of directing the \$100-million BC Tech Fund. She is also a digital strategy adviser at Vancity Credit Union. Ms. Sinclair was the founder and CEO of NCompass Labs, the digital content management company acquired by Microsoft in 2001. She was also the founding director of the ExCITE lab at Simon Fraser University, the first digital media technology centre in Canada. Ms. Sinclair has a PhD in Renaissance drama as well as an honorary doctor of science in computing science from the University of British Columbia.

My family moved to Vancouver from Winnipeg when I was two weeks old. My father and his brother had a garage and auto-wrecking business in Richmond. My mother stayed at home with us kids – I have a younger sister – but when money got tight, she took a job selling shoes at Woodward's department store.

I grew up in Vancouver, where I live now, but I also lived in Toronto and Montreal at different

points in my life. My husband (Canadian poet and writer Lionel Kearns) and I also spend about six weeks a year in Barcelona, which is our second home. We also have a place on Saturna Island in British Columbia. I generally say I live on an airplane. I am a bit of a whirling dervish, always on the move.

My childhood was free and unencumbered and open to exploration. It helped me understand what it takes to be self-directed. I was given the freedom to choose my own path. So many kids today don't have that opportunity. Their schedules are set up by their parents and schools. I believe the freedom I was given shaped me. From my perspective, there is always something new and exciting to see and do and learn. I think that has been a constant in my life.

I've been lucky, I've had many mentors in my career to date, both men and women. My husband has also had a huge influence on my life. He's always told me that I could be anything and do anything and supported me along the way. I chose well.

I've also mentored a number of young people. I think I've learned equally from young people as well as the older people who have mentored me. I love the exchange of ideas with the younger people I help mentor. Their passion and energy inspire me.

What I love doing more than anything is creating a kick-ass team and them winning in the world. There's leadership involved in building the team, in developing the individuals and in

working side-by-side with them. There are many different facets to leadership; there's the inspiration but also learning from the team members as you lead and teach.

I remember when I decided to form NCompass Labs out of my work at Simon Fraser University. A person in a position of power said to me, 'You aren't seriously thinking of becoming the CEO of the company, are you?' I said, 'As a matter of fact I am.' He suggested I couldn't do it because I was green and because I was a woman. It made it clear, that was exactly what I was going to do. It was a huge motivating force for me. It's part of my personality: When people tell me I can't do something, I want to do it even more.

My mother always told me to roll with the punches. That was good advice. The best advice I received was the idea that I could have an impact on the world. The impact could be economic, social, intellectual, it could be an act of kindness. The concept is that you have the power to make a difference. That was a big thing for me.

I get a lot of energy from connections, whether it's with people, ideas or building something that has meaning in the world. Innovation drives me. At 71 years old, I'm older than anyone I work with in all aspects of my life. People always ask me when I'm going to retire. Retirement doesn't compute for me. I will continue to be active and engaged as long as I can.

Special to The Globe and Mail

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Making the most of organizational politics

MERGE GUPTA-SUNDERJI

OPINION

We've all seen and heard it: When we win on an issue in the workplace, we call it good leadership. When we lose, it's a result of organizational politics.

In reality, it's likely neither.

Whether or not our position prevails on workplace matters is more a function of two other dimensions: your organizational acumen and your perceived integrity.

These two elements were identified in the 1980s by researchers Simon Baddeley and Kim James who studied leaders who had achieved long-term success within their organizations. They identified that when individuals were believed to be acting (1) with integrity, and (2) from an informed organizational perspective, they were significantly more likely to influence and persuade others over to their point of view.

If you come from the school of thought that says (organizational) politics is a bad word, then it's time to find a way to make it work for you, instead of against you.

And Mr. Baddeley and Ms. James's research can help. If you are deliberate and thoughtful about initiating and cultivating relationships that demonstrate your integrity and your understanding of the dynamics in your organization, then you will find yourself coming up on the side of good leadership rather than organizational politics.

Here are four specific ideas to move you in that direction.

BUILD NETWORKS

If you're going to turn "politics" into a constructive force, then you need to grasp one fundamental reality – solid relationships are just as important as your track record in achieving results. Your professional success will lie not just in getting work done, but also in creating allies and advocates, coalitions and alliances. So you should thoughtfully and deliberately build positive bonds with your peers, your staff and your bosses.

Make it a point to leave your desk. Eat lunch with your co-workers so that you hear their points of view. Set up frequent meetings with key stakeholders so that you appreciate their priorities. Engage in regular one-on-one discussions with your manager so that you can keep the lines of communication open and flowing. Establish your credibility as a trusted individual who can maintain confidences. Make commitments and keep them. And then use your network to tap into the grapevine to keep abreast of what is going on.

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WATCH AND LISTEN

Observe how decisions are made in your organization. Whose viewpoint normally tends to sway the outcome? Who are the natural allies, and where and when do conflicts usually arise? Ask questions of others to surface both overt and covert agendas and motivations. Listen to the answers and probe for additional information. When you encounter resistance, show empathy to try to view the situation from another's perspective; it will give you valuable insights into the situation, as well as build understanding and affinity.

This intelligence will give you what you need in order to build buy-in for your point of view.

HELP AND SHARE

When you give and share of yourself, you create goodwill. And goodwill can be relied upon when you need allies. So lend your time, your encouragement and your expertise without any expectation of reciprocity. Offer to help your peers when you are able.

Acknowledge your colleagues for their efforts when they do great work. Be forthcoming with your knowledge and share your resources. Assume good intentions from others, even when relationships get rocky. Step up to support your colleagues when they need it. Then, when you have to draw upon the goodwill, there will be a healthy balance in the relationship bank account.

SEEK WIN-WIN OUTCOMES

In situations of conflict, actively look for ways to co-operate so that all parties feel as if they've achieved at least a partial win. This often comes down to asking questions to determine what is really important to each person. When you concentrate on uncovering what is really essential to individuals, it is possible to find a mutually acceptable outcome that gives everyone most of what they want. If you consciously focus on seeking win-win outcomes, you will be characterized as someone who is trustworthy and who operates with integrity.

Organizational politics don't have to drive you mad. They can in fact be a decisive factor toward helping you achieve great things. But it will require you to shift your mindset; to embrace it as a positive force, rather than to fight it.

Special to The Globe and Mail

Determining the truth in a seemingly awkward work situation

CHOIRE SICHA

Question

My manager (a man) told me (a woman) that someone I thought I had a healthy and positive partnership with (a man) is scared of me. If true, I feel awful! I would never want this person to feel intimidated, and will find opportunities to make myself more accessible. But ... I also think my manager is a liar, LOL. How do I both find out if I am scaring someone, and call out the patriarchy that my manager hid behind? – D.J.

Answer

Sometimes when men say that women "scare" someone in the

office, they actually mean "respect." Your credentials or performance may intimidate your colleagues. That is fine. Most men spend their lives trying to make that happen!

In any event, the only logical path to assume both these facts are true: Your co-worker is afraid of you and your boss is out to get you. You should take two or three actions that open a slightly deeper relationship with this colleague. At the same time, you should also secretly go on a campaign against your manager. Present him secretly with some chances to succeed or fail at being a successful ally. Perhaps it is you who has been missing the clues in this murder mystery all along – and the victim was supposed to be you.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU FEEL THAT YOU CARE TOO MUCH

Question

I am a 56-year-old woman who has worked in many different professional settings, most recently in government and legal offices, and mainly in support roles – paralegal, secretary, etc. I have never been the highest-paid person in these offices, and yet I feel that I usually am the employee most counted on to be on time, do quality work and keep things flowing smoothly. This has never bothered me previously, as I find that's kind of what naturally comes to my personality.

However, lately I am feeling that a question constantly pops in my head and I can't wrap my brain

around a good answer: "Why do I care more than the people in charge do?" I am not making the big bucks, and yet I am stressing out as if I own the place.

Can you help me figure this out? – S.B.

Answer

Oh, I actually think you have already figured this out. Offices run on you – offices are you. The super-competent who can see more than four hours ahead, while the people "in charge" blunder from endless meeting to endless meeting, making plans that'll get whiteboarded away next week. We don't value this kind of work most of the time (although there are exceptions). Two ideas:

■ You could rebrand yourself

and look for new work accordingly. You are a chief of staff. You are a senior project manager. You are a chief of operations. This has the advantage of bringing your level of caring into a more correct level of authority, salary and respect.

■ You could also stop caring and devote your apparently fearsome energies into a project worthy of your time – a local literacy project, a food bank, a refugee settlement group. Then you could clock out of your job at five and get your satisfaction elsewhere. I can imagine that would lead to a rewarding career transition for you, too. What if your passion and your abilities were joined in the same enterprise? You'd be unstoppable and happy at the same time.

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