

Bold(her)

The Power of Community

Note to reader: The statements and opinions expressed by guests & interviewees are theirs alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of Bank of Montreal or its affiliates.

Anu Bidani:

This was much bigger than what I thought when I started. And in this journey, I could make the choice of being small and stay where I was, or take a much bigger, bolder point of view. And say, I know you've done this your entire life, your career for others. You're very capable of having a more former point of view of your voice and working with it. And that's what I did.

((Music))

Lisa Bragg:

Anu Bidani has a formula to her success and it's not luck. It's hard work and community. She started to learn about the power of community while working in corporate, but now feels its full strength as an entrepreneur. She's the founder and CEO of Stem Minds.

((Music))

Lisa Bragg:

I'm Lisa Bragg and this is Bold(h)er - stories of and for women who stand out. Brought to you by BMO for Women.

((Music))

Lisa Bragg:

Is there a pivotal moment that you can look back and say, that's the red thread? That's the moment that weaves throughout to bring me to where I am today? Is there a moment like that for you?

Anu Bidani:

When you start off in your career, you're learning, you're growing. And I hit a stage in my career where suddenly the leader I wanted to become, who I wanted to become became very clear to me. It was part of a program that I was running at the bank I was working. It was a leadership program and you were in a big project. And I suddenly realized that my leadership skills or what I had thought it would be, was not what it would be in the near future. So it was a pivotal moment where I recognized the power of my own voice, the power of who I am, who I wanted to be, the power of it's not always about getting the job done, it's about how you get it done. That purpose and meaning when it all comes together for you was a very aha moment for me. And I did change my trajectory in who I wanted to be as a leader, as a role model for young people and the direction I would take in my life.

Lisa Bragg:

Oh, so many good things to unpack with that. So, having your own voice, what was it like to figure that out?

Anu Bidani:

It was very powerful. And I say very powerful, because when you come out of a university program, you graduate, your first job, you're excited to learn and to grow. And even when you have your own voice, you sometimes shut it off because you feel like I'm not mature enough. Maybe I'm too early on. These people around me are so much more experienced. Maybe I should keep quiet. And I would say, I did that for quite good, five to eight years of my career after graduation. I would just listen. And even though I had opinions, I wouldn't stand up. But then suddenly I realized my voice actually mattered. Age was irrelevant. Experience was irrelevant. Point of view was important. So, I actually started becoming more comfortable in stating my point of view and making sure that when I was in a moment, I took the opportunity to say my point of view. And I thought once I started that role, it just became easier and easier every time I did it. And then later on in my career, that was my biggest strength, the power of using my voice to express my opinions.

Lisa Bragg:

Now you said something earlier, and I want to touch back on it though. You said it doesn't really matter exactly the project outcome, it matters what goes on to make the project happen. Can you clarify that or bring that back? Because that was, that was something that really went ding, ding, ding to me. But I wanted to unpack that a little bit more. Can you explain that to me?

Anu Bidani:

Yeah, for sure. So, when you are early on in your career and your boss comes to you and say, "I wanted to do this project." You are so driven to be your best and deliver it on time, on budget, as professionally as you can. And I would do that. Right? If something had to have been done, I'll fold my sleeve and get it done. And what I realized was it wasn't me alone doing it. It was doing it with the team. This means uplifting every team member was with me in that experience, in that journey, to make it happen. So, this meant taking pause moments and coaching and mentoring, and not just me solving the problem, but having the power of everybody else with me in solving the problem. And suddenly it became from me wanting to be successful in the project to we becoming successful in the project.

And I think it's a transition you go through when you're early in your career, when it's about you trying to establish your credibility. And as you become a leader, it is not about me, it is about we. And that was the transition I think for me, where I moved, I guess, from a junior resource to somebody who was going to become a leader. And to absorb that mindset, that it is not always about getting to the end game, it's about how do I get to that end game with others with me and uplifting them with me.

Lisa Bragg:

Was this unfolding the way that you thought, or was it only in reflection that you can truly see it?

Anu Bidani:

I think it's truly in reflection. In the moment, I've always been very opportunistic. If I see some an opportunity, I would grab it, because I wanted to learn. I was curious. But it was never a plan, this is what the steps I will take. It was, am I moving in the right direction? And the direction was, am I learning new skills? Am I growing? Am I feeling intellectually that I'm using my brain power to have a meaningful impact? So, it was never that I knew what next step would look like, but it was what opportunities came along the way and how I would grab and work with them. And it does lead you to a certain pathway, but it was not a planned pathway for me.

Lisa Bragg:

Can you let me know, do you have any friends professional or otherwise that actually have a plan that they're able to stick to nowadays? Because in my peer group, I think we're all much more opportunistic and looking for that next opportunity and also building our skills along the way. And when it looks like somebody has it all planned out, it looks super easy, but then you find out when peel back and it's like, no, no, no, no, everyone's just all over the place too. Is that true for you or is it you do know people who are actually planned and ready to go?

Anu Bidani:

I think a lot of people know what they want to do in the early stages in their career. Oh, I want to be a doctor. I want to be an engineer. And once you get into it, I think your paths do change. I don't know anyone who has stuck with the same path from day one to the end game. And you're right, I think it is about opportunity, but also it's about having that open mindset that I'm going to discover, explore and grow. And wherever the path takes me, I will take it. And I think definitely, for me personally, I took that pathway. It was like I was willing to take opportunities and go through them without any expectation of the end result.

I think a lot of time consequences and end results drive whether we take an opportunity or not, but I never took a leap into anything with the expectation that I knew where I was going to fall. I was comfortable no matter where it took me, I would have still learned something about myself or about the opportunity. And I would still be in a better place. And I will always use that attitude in my entire life. And that has served me really well.

Lisa Bragg:

It sounds like you were really set up for that entrepreneur mindset where you do take a big leap. So tell me about that. You're leaving this really solid job and you decide to be an entrepreneur. Tell us about that pivot.

Anu Bidani:

I think the whole pivot came for me was this inner feeling that I needed do something more with my life. I had really enjoyed a great career. I had wonderful growth opportunities. I joined the bank at a junior level, left as managing director. So I truly had a wonderful corporate career. I had great mentors and people I work with. But I did feel like there's a part of me that was missing something. And I think the inspiration for pivoting to entrepreneurship came from my kids. I had two boys and they just were not building the STEM skills that I expected them to build. As a woman in STEM, I saw the power of technology, what it could do. And they were the motivation. You got to do something with it. You've solved problems for everybody else your entire career, but you haven't solved one problem that was for your kids.

And I think that was the key motivation that got me to the courage to leave the safety of a paycheck and say, you know what, I can do this. And yep, I may not know everything, but that's okay. And that was how the leap of faith that I had in myself, and no matter where I went with this idea, I would land somewhere. And I would learn something along the way. And I'm okay with it. And it's a decision I didn't make by myself. I did have my family meeting with that. I had my husband, my kids all at the table and I said, "I feel like I need to do this. But the consequences of making that choice, we're not going to have the same stability like we had before. The paycheck won't be there. All the things easily we were able to get, we're not going to get. Are we all okay with it?"

And I got an overwhelming support from my husband, my kids. And I'm grateful to all of them that they were in this journey with me, knowing very well there were a lot of unknown factors. But they knew my heart was in it. It's something I really wanted to do. And so, having that support with you really makes that leap a lot easier as well. Yeah, and that was kind of the leaping point where I knew I wanted just to do something different. I did it. And then it was about, okay, how do I make it happen? An idea is one thing, but actually doing it is another thing. And that itself was a journey on its own, which was very, very different from my corporate journey.

Lisa Bragg:

That leap, that's the thing. Everyone's so excited to become an entrepreneur. And then when you're actually doing the whole starting a business and growing a business, it's a whole other world out there for you, but you have started a business and you're the founder and CEO of STEM Minds Corporation. Tell us a little bit about that business.

Anu Bidani:

So, STEM Minds is very much focused on kindergarten to grade 12 STEM education. The lens that I'm bringing to the table is educating our young, I would say, innovators and leaders of the future with skills they need to thrive in the world we're moving in. And that world we're moving in is the fourth industrial revolution, where everything is tech enabled, tech driven. You need to understand how this new technology impacts our lives on a day-to-day basis. The jobs that are going to come in the future, even now that the evolution has already started. So, my ultimate goal was to make sure we were preparing children with the right talent and skill set to thrive in that economy. And that's what we do. We teach children anything from coding to robotics, to entrepreneurship, AI, machine learning, big data. We've got a broad spectrum of content that we teach in our in-person innovation center in Aurora.

And then I took a big leap of going global with an online learning platform two years ago. And that's where everything we built for in person is now available at a much larger scale at a global level. So super excited to taking an idea about impacting STEM education from my kids, and realizing it was much bigger than that. And being able to bring STEM Minds from a community business to an entity that is ready to grow global.

Lisa Bragg:

You started it because you noticed your children weren't thriving, or something wasn't moving forward with them in it. So, tell us a little bit about the story about how you really grasped onto this because of your kids. You could see it right in front of you.

Anu Bidani:

Yeah. My oldest son was diagnosed with ADHD early on in his school years. And I'd put him in a lot of programs and I just didn't see the impact. And then when I decided I was going to solve this problem for my kids, I recognized it was a much bigger problem. There were many other kids just like my own, who were very bright in their own way, but just did not have the right environment to foster their personal growth. And I think that was a lens that kind of I work with. And as I mentioned earlier, all the little skills you build in your life to get to where you are, my MBA came in really handy in understanding what it takes to run a business. But in my career, I had shifted jobs every three to five years in new roles. So, I understood risk and governance and project management and enabling technology for solutions, because I had built all these baskets of experience. So, when it came time that I had to bring it all together, I felt like I had all the building blocks built.

And now it was me just taking action on them and enabling them to happen. So that's kind of the thought process I went through. And when I pivoted from financial services to education, they're very different industry verticals. The thread that's common between all of them is the 21st century skills, which are communication, collaboration, creativity. These skills, no matter which verticals you work in, are always relevant. And those were the skills I brought to the table to start understanding and doing a deep dive in education and saying, "Okay, if I have to solve this problem for my kids and other kids out there, how do you do it in a sustainable, impactful manner?"

And that's where understanding education pedagogy, the research that goes behind it, it just started a brand new journey for me of learning and exploration, where I realized like this was much bigger than what I thought when I started. And in this journey, I could make the choice of being small and stay where I was, or take a much bigger, bolder point of view and say, I know you've done this your entire life, your career for others. You're very capable of having a more former point of view of your voice and working with it. And that's what I did. I took that lens, even though I didn't grow up in the field of education, I surrounded myself with people who understood education really well, and guided me and gave me the knowledge I needed to blend with my own skills to kind of make from an idea to a business venture happen.

Lisa Bragg:

Because we do need a community around us to make something happen. We can do so much on our own, but it's that community of saying, I don't know what I don't know. And I have this idea, but let's move forward with it together.

Anu Bidani:

Yeah. I have to say, I think community is one of the biggest, biggest, biggest factors for an entrepreneur's success. And I could not have been where I am on my own. And that's why you asked me what my pivoting or my career was when I said it wasn't about I, it was about we. Well, that journey in entrepreneurship became really relevant to me. I moved into a vertical, I knew no one. So starting my community was really great. I knocked on the door of York Small Business Centre saying, "I want to launch a business. Where do I go?" I know that started my journey of building my first network, my contact, my community, connecting with parents. And this journey, I realized more and more that my community needed to be bigger, because I needed more help. I couldn't do all the things on my own. And I joined, I became a SheEO activator, and that led me to understand more about radical generosity and how all of these people were helping each other out.

And that led me to applying for the SheEO venture. I didn't win the first year, but I did win the SheEO venture in 2021, which was again, a pivoting moment for the business. Because through that community, I connected with so many more communities. And that's where my, even with Bank of Montreal, the support that I got through SheEO was amazing. I got access to funding, and that really changed the trajectory of the business itself. Through that community, I connected with other new communities. I won the scholarship for femmefought through Bank of Montreal again. And that opened a brand new community for me, which again, expanded my reach, my access.

So, in this journey, it has always been the community that has allowed me to expand, connect, and grow. And I wouldn't be sitting here talking about STEM Minds going global without that support. Because from when I started, my network wasn't there. But today I feel like my network is growing every day, and everyone I connect to, I'm grateful for what they're able to give to me. Even though I will also give, but I feel like there's been lot of generosity been extended to me that has allowed me to be where I am today.

Lisa Bragg:

I love this era that we're in though with the radical generosity. And I know when you connect somebody, and I think everyone, so many more people nowadays are willing to connect and say, "I know someone who's interested, I can help you with that." And just put two and two together. We all want to be connectors. I think that it's an easy thing for us to do to help somebody succeed is say, "Hey, I know someone and someone you need to know," and so on and so forth. So, I think then we all have a little bit of a stake in your success. And I think that's a great way to be in this new era, and way for us to take advantage of this technology. So, the community, especially as an entrepreneur in corporate or everything, community is what's going to help you move forward faster and further. Isn't it?

Anu Bidani:

Absolutely. And I encourage everyone when they talk about I'm starting a business, networking and building those communities should always be a priority. And you're very rightly said Lisa, that's one thing that will differentiate someone who's able to knock on someone's door for help and being able to kind of move forward.

Lisa Bragg:

I think it's that reaching out for help, that we've been so guarded against in the past. And this new era is as we head into the fourth and fifth industrial revolutions, it's, we're about we do realize that it's okay to ask for help. And you asking these different communities to say, "Hey, this is what I'm working on." And even experts in pedagogy saying, "This is what I'm doing. Would you like to join in?" And experts in STEM, that's great. That's a great modeling, even for all of your students that you're showing.

Anu Bidani:

Asking for help and being vulnerable. I honestly think, I know in my career historically it was never encouraged. Vulnerability was a weakness. I do believe vulnerable leadership is a strength. And I adopted that in my own business because there's so many things I don't know. And to be able to tell your staff, yes, I may be the CEO, but I don't know this. I'm going to learn with you all of this. I think that vulnerable leadership to me has been very powerful in the sense that I've been able to empower many others who, even younger university graduate may have not seen their voice or the strength in their point of view. But by extending vulnerable leadership, I've been able to get some, I would say a very powerful thinking from a lot of young people who at some point may not have thought they were ready to share, but they did.

So, I do believe that being able to knock on the door, ask for help, or say I don't know this, is totally okay. I have grown more with vulnerable leadership than I did when I thought I knew everything. So I'm a big supporter of that. And I feel like a lot of young people have amazing ideas and their voices matter. And if we can create that positive space where if you knock on a young people's door and ask for their help, for their point of view, it's totally okay than asking with somebody who is a lot more experienced, it shouldn't matter. It shouldn't matter whether what age it is, what experience somebody brings to the table. I do believe every point of view matters and being able to work with that really does help.

Lisa Bragg:

So where do you hope to go with your business? You're global already. So what's the next step for it?

Anu Bidani:

I feel like I've barely just started on that journey. I have so much more to do. I'm excited about the possibilities because we've built a great product which we know works well, is impactful. Now it's about growing that community I started with to a global audience, and seeing how can I get help from others to kind of amplify how education needs to become more accessible? I think what I'm learning more and more is the accessibility piece in developed versus underdeveloped countries, the gap is huge. So, I feel like there's more that can be done. And if I can even make a tiny, tiny difference in that perspective, it will feel like that all of this was for the right purpose, the right reason. Even the inspiration started from my kids, but the purpose was much larger. And that's where I would like to take STEM Minds, to that stage where we're servicing, not just our North American economies, but many other under underserved communities as well.

((Music))

Lisa Bragg:

Now, because you've even taken the steps to get several designations that are really important and are important to a lot of employees too. So, you are a B Corp, which is, you can talk a little bit about that. And then there's something else that you also joined recently. Tell us about those two initiatives.

Anu Bidani:

Yeah, so I had decided when I had launched the business in 2016 that I always wanted to be a B Corp. And the reason for that was I made a deliberate choice to be a for-profit business in education, because I wanted to make sure that I could run a business sustainable in funding, and not relying on others for granted funding. So that meant that I had to take some steps of certification to demonstrate my social impact. And that's where B Corp came in. It took us a good two to three years to actually establish all the processes that are required to be B Corp. So, we achieved a certification in 2019 and very proud of that achievement. And it touches on social environment employees and customers and supplies. It has a very formal methodology, how you assess, so very proud to have that certification.

And then this year we joined Canada's Forest Trust to become net zero carbon footprint. So, we have taken all the offsets to make sure we're running a business that will not negatively impact the climate crisis that we're in. So, we are doing our share of what's in our control in that. But even as the content that we build, what we're teaching children, I wanted to make sure that parents have the confidence that whatever the kids would learn at STEM Minds was pedagogically sound, that it would actually work. So, we actually did, we got our product certified by Education Alliance of Finland, which means that they have looked at our content and they have confirmed that the way we're teaching is the right way to teach kids. We have done a similar certification with Digital Promise out of US as well.

So as much as it's been about building a business and growing, as I said when I started, the sustainable part of it was really key to me. So, becoming B Corp, carbon offset, making sure pedagogically sound product, these are all part of that sustainable decision making that I have made. That's in my control, things that I can do, even though I'm a small business, these are decisions I can make and be comfortable and confident with the mark we're going to leave as we go forward.

Lisa Bragg:

And I think that's what more and more people want to see. They want to see your values. And I think a lot of young people want to see what are your values before I come to work with you or buy from you. But I want to pick it up, a lot of us were, it's fuzzy of when these new eras start. So, looking back in 20 years, somebody will say on this date is when we moved to this new industrial revolution, in the

fourth one. And then soon after we moved to the fifth. So, because I know that they're collapsed. It took us a long time to get to this new era. But how do you help parents thinking through this time? Because you're you're working with educators, but you're also working with parents. How do you help them to adjust to understand why these skills are so necessary? Or are they already lining up for you? And you don't have to sell to them?

Anu Bidani:

I think definitely, education is a big part of it. At the end of the day, we can't teach these students these skills, unless teachers are equally empowered to bring the skills in the classrooms. Right? So that goes hand in hand. And then along with that is also parents, because we all together, collaboratively have to understand why we need to do what we need to do. So, we definitely, we have a parents' Facebook group. We try to share as much as we can. In all our programs, parents are welcome to stay with the kids if they wish, so that they can learn with their children as well. We do a lot of sharing of resources and ideas so that everyone learns along the way with us. And I think that's what's required. As long as there's this open dialogue and communication, it does help.

I've always said every child matters. So, every parent with whom we have these conversations matter. So, we have made a very open business model where we will talk to parents, we will talk to kids, and share our expertise. And now it's been really wonderful where parents will knock on our doors and say, "You know my son or daughter well, what do you think will be the next step for them?". And I think the fact that we build those relationships really tells itself volumes that it is working. Every parent conversation, one at a time, is worth spending the time and working with. And that's what we keep doing.

Lisa Bragg:

Now what would you say to our listeners who are like, "Oh, all this STEM stuff and where am I going to go with it?" Because the point is you're a lifelong learner. And so we're all adjusting to these changing times, some more than others for other jobs, and things are happening fast. What's your advice to people who are listening so they can continually skill up or move forward? Any advice?

Anu Bidani:

I would definitely encourage this mindset of lifelong learning. As much as it's important for young kids, it's also important for adults. A lot of things are shifting around us. And I think if you have that open mindset of being aware of things that are changing around you, and learn and grow, you're going to find yourself in a much better prepared place. And I have to say, I mean, there's lots that's happening in the market where it doesn't cost you to upskill, reskill with knowledge. It's readily available. You just have to spend the time in actual learning and grasping and working with it.

And I would encourage anyone who's listening to not hold themselves back for that learning opportunity. It may seem scary, but once you give yourself the opportunity, it does work. And as I said, there's lots of resources that are available. I think both at a private level, government level, a lot of initiatives projects have been approved that are bringing a lot of this learning to the forefront, that anyone can access and learn with and grow and be aware of the impact of these changes to them.

Lisa Bragg:

What are you thinking about right now?

Anu Bidani:

Right now? I think for me I'm a big supporter of the United Nations sustainability development goals. That's something we adopted when we said quality education. I am very worried that when I look at

education for me, geography doesn't matter. A child in Canada versus in Africa versus India, still a child. They all need equal opportunity in learning. And I feel like as a society, that accessibility really hasn't happened, not at the pace it should. And right now, it's a thought that's in my head saying I started something with a great idea. I feel like I haven't fulfilled that mission yet. I have a long way to go, but I feel like I still have so much to learn to actually solve the problem in a meaningful way.

So, I feel like I may be going through another journey in my head right now of the next growth and pivot for STEM Minds, where now that we've built something that works really well in the smaller community, and yes it's ready for growth and scale, how do we make it accessible? No matter where you are, you should be able to get basic STEM education, because it's required for the world we live in. So how can I make it happen? That's the thought that's right now on the top of my mind, to figure that out, I don't have all the answers. I know it's something that has to be addressed. I just don't know how yet, but I think that will be my next lifelong learning journey or the next phase to figure that out.

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Lisa Bragg:

Anu on Bold(h)er, we always ask these three questions. What's the boldest thing you've ever done?

Anu Bidani:

I think the boldest thing I ever did was when I decided that I was going to go global. Everybody said to me stick to the North American market. It's the market you're in. You know it so well, stick to it. And to me, it was just too small of a thinking. And I always believe if you're going to take leap and you're going to do something, do it big. Because the effort sometimes is very similar to do small or big. So, I opted ... And going global, that decision was really key for me. But it also led to such a wonderful growth opportunity for me at that personal level as well, as I joined more accelerators and learned more about how to grow business and grow and scale.

I built my community along the way, and the global community I have today, I did not have that two years ago. So, making that bold decision of going global was very good both, just personally for my own personal growth, but also for STEM Minds as a business, and the community that I'm part of now.

Lisa Bragg:

When do you wish you were bolder?

Anu Bidani:

I wish I was bolder early on in my career. I think as I said, it took me about eight years before I realized I found my own voice. For those eight years I suppressed that voice quite a bit, even though I felt like I had relevant things to say, meaningful things to kind of contribute to, but I did. And I wish if I had been bolder earlier, I may have had different experiences along the way as well, but no regrets. I learned along the way, and I'm much bolder now, even than I was when I made my first bolder pivot. But I wish I had done that earlier on. And you any of the listeners listening, any young people, never underestimate the power of your voice, no matter what age you are or where, what experiences you have, they matter. If you believe in it, you should say your voice.

Lisa Bragg:

Well, that's a great segue to my next question then. So, what would you say to your 20-year-old self?

Anu Bidani:

I think to my 20-year-old self, I would say be more patient. I've always been a go, go, go. I just want things to happen now. Even at this stage, I'm so much better than I used to be, but I wish I was a little bit more patient in learning and growing and seeing results of choices and decisions you make. That's why in my entrepreneurship journey, I have been more patient than I was ever in my corporate. But it's a lesson learned and I wish that would be one thing I would do differently.

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Lisa Bragg:

So many great gems from Anu Bidani of STEM Minds. You've been listening to Bold(h)er - stories of and for women who stand out. Brought to you by BMO for Women. If you enjoyed this episode, take a listen to our season one or two stories. And if you like the show, please share it with others. Thanks for listening.