

Bold(her)

A Wider Lens

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Lisa Bragg:

For a long time, a woman as a protagonist was elusive in case studies. If you were in an MBA class, less than 20 per cent of case studies showed women as “model leaders in business.”

But it goes much deeper than “it’s only a case study for students.” As our guest today, Vania Sakelaris tells us, case studies matter, reinforcing stereotypes and how leaders see themselves. Role Models are one component of transformative change, and that’s part of the passion Vania brings to her work through her case writing initiative.

((Music))

I’m Lisa Bragg and this Bold(h)er, helping women make their next bold move. Brought to you by BMO for Women.

((Music))

You’re really about, if we can see it, we can be it. What does that mean to you?

Vania Sakelaris:

Seeing is believing, and a lot of making reality happen depends on mindset. I think once we lock into the right mindset, then we’re good to go.

Lisa Bragg:

Ooh, how do you lock into the right mindset?

Vania Sakelaris:

I don’t get into my own way. I think when there’s a glimmer of hope or an opportunity ahead of me, it’s like, how do we action it? How do we do it? How do I not slow me down, but how do I speed me up? What do I need to be successful?

Lisa Bragg:

Is there anything in particular that you do besides having that in the front of your mind? Do you have it as a sticky note on your computer or anything like that?

Vania Sakelaris:

I’m a big believer of values-based leadership and values come with me to inform my thoughts, my actions, my behaviors. As opportunities present themselves in my day-to-day living, I think that when I’m doing things that use my strengths, when I’m doing things that align with passion and they’re enabled by values, I’m in a good place.

Lisa Bragg:

That's a good place to be for sure. It's a place where we can have room for other people, isn't it? Instead of being in a scarcity spot, it's more of an abundance mindset where we can then say, you know what? There's room for all of us. I think that's what a big part of who you are, isn't it?

Vania Sakelaris:

Success is the sum of all parts. The only success that I've really truly realized I could not have done without having the right people around me. Sometimes leading, sometimes following, but it definitely takes an army.

Lisa Bragg:

It does take lots of people to help move us along for sure. You've been looking at who are our models, our poster children of all of these things that we don't always see it. We can't always be it if we can't see it. You've been really digging into that. Tell us about the research that you've done to help us see more women entrepreneurs and women in business.

Vania Sakelaris:

I had been a woman in corporate business for about 20 years and went back to school to enhance my leader toolkit. I had a science background. I hadn't signed up for business. I found myself in the path of business and in very senior roles. In doing that, I found an executive MBA program that I felt was a good fit for my needs. In that program, I read about 300 case studies of different leaders and different businesses. What stood out for me at the time as a mother of two girls was a lot of the leaders in the case studies that were used to support our studies were Bob and Harry, what I call Bob and Harry.

I pondered then, where's Mary? Why is the leader never Mary? Many of the cases were old, a few current, but it stuck out at me as something that I didn't fully relate to because I had worked at that point with many different faces of leaders in my initial phase of my career, which was in healthcare. I was surprised not to see a little bit more representation of women leadership, be they women in business or women entrepreneurs. After my studies, I ended up starting my own business. Part of that work, I made case writing. I thought, let me contribute to the change I want to see in this space. How can I start to identify and write the stories of leaders, women entrepreneurs, including the many faces of women entrepreneurs or women in business or women on boards, including underrepresented groups, including indigenous women, persons of color. I thought it was important for the people who I had come to know as examples of women in positions of leadership or entrepreneurship. How can we tell their stories in the context of business cases?

Lisa Bragg:

When I was in journalism, my background's in journalism, I would often try to avoid Bob and Harry as you've identified them, always looking for somebody different to interview. So often I'd go up to those voices and say, "Hey, I think you're an expert. You're the leader. I'd love to tell your story in this context." So often she'd say, "Oh no, go down the hall to Bob and Harry." So often we don't see ourselves in that leadership context. Did that happen to you at all where people would be like, "Oh no, not me."?

Vania Sakelaris:

Very often. There's humility and there's people who don't have ego and who sometimes get in their own way in terms of their confidence and not embracing their skills. They've been around me all my life. In fact, so much so that my business also includes an executive coaching arm where I do a lot of

coaching to help illuminate the strengths that I see in terms of leader strengths or entrepreneurship strengths to help them embrace their own strengths and not get in their way.

Lisa Bragg:

What was the intention for you to write cases?

Vania Sakelaris:

I felt it was important to have a balance of representation of leaders in business school classrooms. I write and publish cases through the Ivy School of Business, their second largest writers of cases in the world behind Harvard. I've also written case studies in collaboration with Harvard. The cases that get produced and get published and become part of the library get used by business schools around the world. Ivy has partnerships with over 80 universities around the world.

When professors are looking to find cases to use in their classrooms, be it classrooms on leadership or classrooms on entrepreneurship, organizational behavior, marketing, whatever they're teaching, they can pick and find the right case. I wanted to be able to provide a broader selection of, we call them protagonists, the leader being featured in the case. I wanted to contribute to a broader perspective and range of protagonist examples, including the many faces of women as examples of leaders.

Lisa Bragg:

What do you think the impact has been so far?

Vania Sakelaris:

I've had the joy of being part of the classroom discussions where the cases that I've written are used to support learning. Case studies really feature a dilemma a leader has had, a decision point at some point in their travels. I write a case so that the classroom then debates, if I was, for example, Lisa, who's the protagonist in the case, what should Lisa do? Should she go to the Middle East? Should she not go? In support of your wonderful latest endeavor, Lisa. The class gets to debate, what should she do? Then I've written in the back end of the case, what actually happened.

The learning comes from hearing different perspectives and debating options, identifying risk and opportunity. There's excitement both in the students unpacking the case, but even myself as a songwriter, hearing the song on the radio, hearing the case be dissected by the students. Then sometimes the protagonist even joins me in the classroom and then speaks to what they actually did as it relates to the dilemma that the case was about. There's usually a good buzz. It was exciting to watch impact in terms of catalyzing their thoughts, expanding their opinions and perspectives to help them make choices in the future, building on the new learning.

Lisa Bragg:

I love the way you put it though, songwriter, and hearing how it's played in the classroom. Does that ever change you and change how you've been thinking about things when you hear how the students interact and react to your songs?

Vania Sakelaris:

Absolutely. I say, I'm the songwriter, my professor partner is the person on stage, the conductor of the orchestra, who then is the performer on the stage bringing the case to life. The case belongs to Sony, for example, because it's a licensed product after I've written it. It becomes part of an inventory and people can download it as often as they want to play it. That's why I like the song analogy. I can say

that I get excitement and many times I've been invited to be part of the classroom where you hear the students saying, "Well, the case speaks to that, and the case speaks to this."

I go, "Yes, it does. Yes, it does, because I wrote it." In their option analysis, their creative minds take them to new places, which excite me and I learn from their perspectives. I'm a continuous learner, a lifelong learner. It's always intriguing, exciting and inspiring to think about how powerful and how widespread the thoughts can go when the diversity of voices and opinion come together.

Lisa Bragg:

Oh, that's such a good line. The diversity of opinion and voices come together. That's so important. What do you hear from the people in the class then when you present the case studies? Do they notice that there's such intention for making sure that there's women voices in the case study? Do they notice at all?

Vania Sakelaris:

No, it's invisible. I've always been quiet in leadership style. I know what my motivator is. I know my why. Mindful representation. Again, I didn't see a balance in representation when I was a student. I get excited that there's some people in the classroom might identify with the protagonists, represented by a leader in that case. For some people, it might be important. It might be inspiring. It might be empowering and say, one day that could be me. I wanted to be able to ride that option. Again, mother of two daughters. I said, would my daughters identify with Bob? Probably not in all cases. In some aspects of Bob's character or some aspects of Bob's leadership style, maybe. There was that missing piece. Hearing excitement in the unpacking of the case and a little bit of that inspiration in terms of what people I've heard in discussions I've been part of are taking away. I'm hopeful that there's a few people who leave with a spark seeing themselves as a potential leader like the one they just studied.

Lisa Bragg:

Does anyone ever say, well, this doesn't seem realistic that, Molly would be the protagonist in this story. Do you ever hear any pushback though from people saying we don't really see it enough to believe it?

Vania Sakelaris:

No, I think we're in a changing time. I think that, the learners I've been exposed to and even myself as a learner in the classroom, what might've been a traditional norm, has been challenged, continues to be challenged. There's many faces of entrepreneurs and leaders. I tend to work with entrepreneurs at all ends of the spectrum, including students in the university incubators. I'm seeing the many faces of young entrepreneurs and founders and value creators.

For them, it's a little bit more of a norm in a less scary place. If it can be fueled by more examples that are inspirational success stories or learnings and failure. I also write about failures, what not to do, and so they don't repeat mistakes and to save time and energy. Not all cases are successes, but how can we learn through failure? Failure is just okay.

Lisa Bragg:

Failure is just okay. That's a great place to stay. Failure is okay. How do you help them unpack where so many people are taught perfectionism, 100%, all those kinds of things. How do you help them unpack that?

Vania Sakelaris:

When I used to lead teams in healthcare, I'd say, when there was noise or complaints or failure, I said, no, let's unpack that. There was two things that I'd say, no, they've just gifted us awareness when there's noise. They've gifted us awareness of what they don't want. We're richer for it. When we get a bad survey result or a complaint, to avoid sticking in an unproductive space, I take them back to we're richer because we're aware of what not to do again.

When we were unsuccessful on a bid or a project, I say, no, we now know what not to do. We'll put that on what not to do list. When there was success, we put it on the what to do list. Balancing the view and saying that there's richness and wisdom in both.

Lisa Bragg:

Yes, that's such a good way forward to say, yes, it might've been a problem. Things didn't go our way, but here's how it does go our way. There's actually a Latin term for it. I'm sure it. Amor fati?

Vania Sakelaris:

Yes, I've heard it.

Lisa Bragg:

Do that term? Yes. Is that what you're practicing there?

Vania Sakelaris:

I guess it's in that same vein. It's intentionality because there's wisdom in success and failure. It links to psychological safety and being okay with failure and failing forward and being richer coming out of it. It's like the, so what? Now what? It's happened, but what we do about it is more important than what happened to us.

Lisa Bragg:

Is there a case study that stands out to you that you're always proud to own and to know that you're a part of? Is there a story that you can share with us?

Vania Sakelaris:

Oh, I hate to pick one. No, I think I'd say that I stand proudly behind all of them. I've published over 20. I have a couple in the pipeline. For me, I feel I'm proudest of the fact that these are chapters in a leader or an entrepreneur's life that are part of their journey. When we invite them to talk to us about, pick a dilemma you had, take us to that dilemma. What were the options you considered? We write about the dilemma.

When they read the case when it's done, they love hearing a chapter, the joy they have in seeing the chapter of their life revisited and told well. I had one recently say, I actually have that quote in front of me. That was, "I was taken back in the way this was captured and the subtleties and nuances of the situation. I've told this story many times before, but I've never, ever captured it, this way. Bravo." There's joy in having people share in the excitement of an important chapter of their journeys which otherwise would have been just a silent chapter that contributed to their success. It's that type of small nuggets of fuel for my passion in writing that keeps me writing.

Lisa Bragg:

Why was it important for you to have small and corporate and C-suite? Why was it important for you to have the different levels of people reflected in your case studies?

Vania Sakelaris:

I guess if you think about it representation was the gap that I was trying to address in my writing. Representation means many different faces of leaders. To be clear, I don't limit my writing to only women in leadership, but I've done a big series on women in leadership because of this. If I've come across great successes in business as a result of male founders, that's been part of my case writing as well. I wanted to be able to create a variety of faces of leaders in the stories that I write and share.

Some will identify with a startup business owner and the challenges that the startup business owner has. Some may be a very large business that's looking at scaling nationally or globally and the challenges leaders there can have. Different parts of the country, rural versus urban, different types of businesses, retail, service industry. I wanted to be able to provide a variety of faces of leaders. I purposely also started to include the face of woman on boards so that there's governance examples, corporate examples, large and small business examples, different parts of Canada, different parts of the world.

I've started to write about global leaders so that we can see leadership and leadership challenges as common and universal. It gives us many entry points to be able to identify with one of them saying, "Okay, that's what they did. Maybe that's a way forward for me as well." Maybe, "I'm inspired by what that leader did. What can I do to also fuel my own passion or dilemma beyond where I am today?" It was really to give many examples and many sources of inspiration to really support that representation piece.

Lisa Bragg:

You've built some case studies with BMO for Women, tell us about that.

Vania Sakelaris:

As I was seeking to write more of these cases, I approached BMO with a shared goal of how can we help woman entrepreneurs this way as well? How can I help to showcase some of your successes in some of your BMO clients? How can I help to tell the stories of women leaders through BMO staff and board members? There was support for a shared goal of let's highlight some of these great cases. They were quick to say, "Yes, let's partner," and had many examples of wonderful leaders to showcase. I was looking for a cast and they had a plentitude of people for us to highlight.

It just so happened that we embarked on a series of 10 cases together and they've been a wonderful partner on identifying great leaders. We came up with a selection criteria to ensure that we included a large cross-section of the many faces of women leaders and entrepreneurs. I'm just approaching the last case right now of a series of 10 and each of them's different, each of them delightful. I'm hoping they inspire many readers and the people who I've written about always get a kick out of being highlighted.

Lisa Bragg:

How inspired do you feel after completing one? You hear about their beginnings, the messy middle, where they are today. How do you feel at the end of writing one and looking back and reflecting on your journey with them?

Vania Sakelaris:

I get excited from the minute I meet them. I'm thinking, "I can't wait to tell your story." There's many ways to slice and dice a story. My biggest constraint is time. Carving out time to really for creative

thought and to give it attention it needs. I get excited about being able to present a draft to them because no case proceeds without a consent. They need to feel comfortable that I've accurately captured what they've told us in an interview was a chapter in their life.

When they read the final draft and sign off on consent, there's usually excitement for them at that point, which then fuels my excitement to write more. Again, in the bonuses, many of them get invited to the classroom to be present for presenting the case and being in as a live protagonist, I can tell you they've enjoyed it as much as I do. Those are the fringe benefits. Those are bonuses. I don't do it for that outcome, but when that happens, it's a dual pleasure.

Lisa Bragg:

What do you think the one that's really hot right now for challenging the status quo where people didn't even realize that was the way people were thinking? Is there one that's hot right now where people are willing to explore, scratch, take apart, disassemble? Is there one that people are open to?

Vania Sakelaris:

I'm finding that people are seeing the differences in terms of generational impacts of the way of work. The way of work was one way of work. As I'm working with leaders, they're seeing that how we show up with and meet our teams where they're at to be able to help grow them and to help us together advance business aims. There's an openness to adapting to what might be the millennial, Gen X, Gen Y, but differentiating and segmenting our understanding of preferred ways of work, employee incentives, employee motivators.

We've moved away from a one size fits all in terms of how we reward, how we motivate, how we grow our staff to really, I'm seeing more acceptance on adapting our approaches as the demand for good talent continues to be an ongoing challenge at this changing time, in this changing world.

((MUSIC))

Lisa Bragg:

Failure is such a hot topic right now, but so many of us are quick to dismiss it. We don't really give it some space. What's your advice to dealing with, we intellectually know, okay, it's just a failure, but there's so much more to unpack with that. How do you help people unpack failure?

Vania Sakelaris:

Failure links into a topic that I feel has become a hotter topic as of late, and it falls under the umbrella of psychological safety. I have often followed Professor Amy Edmondson's work out of Harvard, and her research really looked at success and failure in teams. She went into it anticipating one output, but found that the most successful teams were the ones who she had found were failing, and failing together and learning through failure and being open to failure, being comfortable in failure. She developed a framework.

I got so interested that I got certified in the use of her framework as part of my coaching. There's four dimensions of her framework. How inclusive is a team in terms of openness to many voices or not? How willing are they to help each other or not? How open are their conversations and what's their attitude to risk or failure? Her work really said these things have to be present and the failure piece is the part that really is the lowest score usually on the teams that have been assessed through her framework around the world.

When she looked at successful teams and looked at other studies, including a Google study on successful teams and some of their 300 most successful teams in North America, psychological safety was the top element of a successful team. That includes attitude to risk and failure. When we look at success and performance based on research, failure and being comfortable with failure, there's evidence that it needs to be present in a healthy way.

How do we help reframe failure? That's something that's been my mantra in terms of we're richer for what we know through failure. That's why my cases are also about successes and failure in business. Being able to help to speak to failure and being able to raise the profile as to what's the upside to failure is something that's part of my awareness in my writing. It's something that I think research will show us people should continue to embrace for all the right reasons.

Lisa Bragg:

Things are changing fast for sure. Are you optimistic for the next generation? You said the next generation is seeming to get it a lot faster and moving forward with it. Are you concerned at all about some of the backlash in the world of work that we're hearing nowadays and some of the politics, but that things are harder to move in some areas? Are you concerned about that or do you feel it's full steam ahead?

Vania Sakelaris:

I've taught a course on the future of work. In talking with learners at the end, future leaders, the pipeline of future leaders, a lot of the discussions I've had and I've been privy to have is the old way of work, one way forward. One career for life. We've moved away from that. They're starting to embrace the many faces of the world of work and that it might involve many chapters, many different gigs, trying to embrace this notion of transferable skills to take with them for the journey of life. I'm seeing a little bit more openness to not a straight line, because what I saw as a student mentor 10 or 15 years ago was this pressure or perceived barrier of making the wrong choice as it comes to their career.

What if I go through the wrong door, Vania? What if? What if? What if? Whereas now starting to see a change to the mindset of overcoming that barrier of. If that chapter doesn't work, I'll just move to the next chapter. If that doesn't work, I'll just start my own business. We're starting to see an openness to the many chapters in the future of work. It's starting to evolve in a positive way. Again, mindset is a big part of a leader success or failure.

Lisa Bragg:

Yes, success or failure. It's being willing to try the different doors because I think that people will work for corporations. Then they'll go off and work at an NGO and then they might start their own thing and then they might work for nonprofit. I think it's all of those things. It's the transferable skills that keep people going. Do you ever have a hard time? I don't think you work with parents a lot, but a lot of parents or grandparents are still job for life. Get those golden handcuffs. Do you hear any of that at all? Is that so antiquated?

Vania Sakelaris:

Oh, yes. I think for about 15 years, I was a chair of school councils in schools my daughters went to. Mobilizing discussions with parents in support of academic success, in support of a bright future, that was a constant chatter around the tables that I've been part of. It was the generation that I came from in supporting a changing face of a generation. The generation where phones came in and cell phones weren't even something that existed when my kids started school.

The thinking about the future with digital technology and the changing technology and the changing face of the world that worked because of it. Those discussions about how to help support a success of our children in a changing world has remained a constant and very gray in many areas because we can't fix what we don't know. There's a lot of things we don't know.

Lisa Bragg:

Yes, we don't know what we don't know until we're in it. That's where I wonder sometimes, did people just not see that the case studies were so represented to only one group? Did they just not see it? Sometimes the blinders, we don't realize it. It takes someone like you to come along and say, "Look, this is not good. This is not showing the way for the full learner." Do you ever get pushback in your work with writing the case studies from other peers in academia?

Vania Sakelaris:

Not at all. Actually, some of my professor colleagues, some of my former professors in my MBA program. When I said I was embarking on this initiative to write cases featuring women and they said, "Vania, it's as important for the woman," because of what I shared of why I was interested as a catalyst to start writing these cases. They said, "It's as important for the men in the classrooms to understand some of the barriers women face and some of the glass ceilings and challenges women face because sometimes they don't realize it's happening or that they may be contributing to it. It's as important for our male students as it is for the female students."

I thought that was a nice balancing. That came from a male account. One of my professors in entrepreneurship who expanded my view as to the opportunity in the road ahead in terms of who to inspire and to catalyze.

Lisa Bragg:

Vania, is there anything I didn't ask you that you'd like to share with us?

Vania Sakelaris:

I'd say that there's always an individualized approach to learning. I've gone into it knowing that, it's not a one size fits all. People will take away from my writing or my coaching or all the work that I do in supporting leaders and entrepreneurs to growth. As long as they find a key to unlock a door, everybody's got a different key. What works for some won't work for others.

I'm hopeful that there'll be things that they see in my writing as examples of success or examples of skills or values or character that have been described in the leaders that I that I highlight that help to provide a bit of a goalpost to help inform their future learning, and to help provide a direction in terms of things to think about pursuing themselves. They say 21 days a habit helps to drive changes in behavior.

I'm hoping that there's new perspectives in the people who read my cases and that there's new thoughts and new actions and new behaviors to help drive changes and performance and bigger, greater things. That they're inspired to grow their skills and take actions in support of some of the leader examples they've read about in the hopes of either emulating it, surpassing it, or, being fueled by some of the examples of great leadership in the subjects that I've chosen to write about.

Lisa Bragg:

I just appreciate the seeds that you've been sowing along the way for all of us.

Vania Sakelaris:

I'm always open to writing new cases of successes and failures in business to help, again, inspire future leaders. I feel that hitting students in the classroom also provides a pipeline for some of these industries. While people are thinking about what path to take by finding out more about certain industries or certain opportunities in the cases I write about could be a pipeline for people to pursue, organizations, industries that they hadn't thought about. I think there's a good opportunity there for employers and industries to give thought to cases like that to inspire young leaders and young minds.

Lisa Bragg:

Vania, I'm just so impressed that it's so interesting to say, "Oh, here's something that hasn't really been tapped into." This is a job. It's so fascinating to say, "I'm going to go profile these people." So good for you for tapping into that and finding that there's a wealth of opportunity for you in that. Did you ever think when you sat down to become a student in your MBA that this would be the path that you were going to take?

Vania Sakelaris:

Never. I didn't even think I was going to be an entrepreneur. I was going back to my world in government. My portfolio had grown and the scale and scope of my authority had grown and I had gone to expand my leader toolkit because I've often believed, it's important to know what you don't know and to do something about it. I knew that I needed to enhance my skills. I went there with a different motivation. When I got into the business classroom, I realized how universal business challenges were and leader challenges were the same.

It didn't matter where you were in the world, what sector you were part of. It liberated me from thinking about what I could continue to provide in terms of serving health care industry. I thought what I've now learned and built my confidence, I can apply to any industry and any leader anywhere in the world. It was the catalyst for eventually opting to start a business after my graduate studies to help leaders.

I call it lonely, the top club. I exist to really help leaders through challenge and change. Some of them are emerging leaders who are learning through my cases and some, who are early in their career journey or at the top of their game and just need support and skill development and helping to manage their teams to continue to be successful. Where there's challenge and change, there's a space for what I do. No, I could never have predicted this in 2011 when I was an MBA student.

Lisa Bragg:

Thanks Vania.

((music))

You've been listening to Bold(h)er, helping women make their next bold move, brought to you by BMO for Women. I'm Lisa Bragg. Join us for our next episode, I'm sure there are more than a few case studies on her, and there are World Records for sure - surfing legend Maya Gaebira joins us to talk about Belief, resilience and reframing failure.