

She Said/She Said Podcast WITH LAURA COX KAPLAN Episode 191

Title: Turn connections into relationships, and relationships into INFLUENCE!

Author/Entrepreneur Susan McPherson Episode 191

Guest: Susan McPherson

SHOW OPEN:

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Building influence is something anyone can learn. It's an investment you can make in yourself and it can hold the keys to achieving your dreams and having the life and impact you want to have. I'm Laura Cox Kaplan. I've learned a lot over three decades about building and sustaining influence and how using it and using it effectively can make a big, big difference in your life and career.

Here on She Said/She Said Podcast, we're digging into the different dimensions that help us build and sustain influence. If you thought being an influencer was just for social media, think again. Whether you're starting a business, raising money for a cause, negotiating a promotion, running your household, or trying to connect with those who don't share your views, understanding and using the different dimensions of influence will increase your chances of success whatever your goals may be. Listening to She Said/She Said Podcast is a smart, efficient investment you can make in you. I'm really glad you're here, and I'm excited we're on this journey together.

EPISODE 191 INTRODUCTION:

Hey friend,

Welcome to she said/she said podcast .

Today we're talking about the power of effective connection -- and specifically how to create smart, thoughtful strategies to help us build influence, achieve personal and professional objectives, and to live a happier, more engaged existence.

Now you may be saying, wait, I already connect with people all the time. I'm sure that's True, but do you connect with the objective aimed at actually forging and deepening a relationship? And

is connecting with people something that you benchmark along with other areas in your life that you measure.

For most of us, it's not.

My guest today is Susan McPherson. Susan is the author of a terrific book called "The Lost Art of Connecting: the Gather, Ask, Do Method for Building Meaningful Relationships."

I really loved this conversation with Susan -- as well as her terrific book -- and I think you will too. One reason is because she talks about the power of connecting as part of personal and professional growth objectives, and ones that we can measure and manage toward just like other benchmarks. And of course, things we measure tend to be the things we pay most attention to.

Susan talks about in the book and in today's conversation about how making a genuine connection sparks learning, reduces burnout, spurs innovation, and creates a sense of purpose and well-being -- it also combats loneliness. For many people that's been especially present over the course of past couple of years.

I would add that connection is also an essential component needed to build and sustain influence.

In addition to being an author, Susan is also the founder of McPherson Strategies, a communications consultancy that focuses on the intersection of brands and social impact.

Susan is a prominent public speaker, and a regular contributor to the Harvard Business Review, Fast Company Magazine and Forbes.

A few other key areas that i want to highlight before we jump in:

1. Networking Connecting and networking are not necessarily the same thing, but connection in the way that Susan discusses will no doubt make your networking efforts more successful.

2. The value Susan's approach has had in her own life and career, including how she built her business. Where more than 90 percent of the work has been inbound -- meaning folks coming to her.
3. The role of doing our homework before connecting.
4. The value of employing The simple question "what can I do to help?"
5. And if you are a fan of James Clear and his book "Atomic Habits" I think you'll hear much in our conversation with Susan that's reminiscent of the value of habits for changing behaviors.

And now my conversation with Susan McPherson....

CONVERSATION:

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Susan, welcome to She Said She Said.

Susan McPherson:

Laura, I am super excited to be here. Thank you so much for this wonderful opportunity.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Well, I'm so happy to have you, and I loved the book. I am really thrilled to talk to you this morning. This topic of connecting could not come at a better time, or maybe I should say reconnecting, because we are all still emerging from COVID. I'm so tired of hearing about it and talking about it, and yet it's still here. It's still a factor. But one of the things I would love for you to start with and address was why this book on connecting and why now? Why was this so important to you?

Susan McPherson:

Well, a lot of people, when they see the title, assume that I wrote it in response to the pandemic. But for anybody who has written a book, it's a long arc. I put forth the book proposal, I think, five years ago. So well beyond, well before March of 2020. And I had started to see perhaps in the oughts, this notion of measuring our success in connecting and networking by

the number of clicks and likes and followers, myself included. And that is transactional. That is not the impact that can happen when you are seriously making, or not even seriously, fun, frivolously making connections. And then a friend of mine told me that when she took her son and daughter to the bus stop every morning, they were age 10 and 12, and she would hug them goodbye, send them up on the big yellow school bus, and as soon as they took their respective seats, their heads would bob down to look at their handheld devices. And every other child on the school bus did the exact same thing.

And I thought to myself, wow, we have a serious problem because this isn't just children. This is adults. We're all doing this. And I'm not anti-technology by any stretch of the imagination. If anything, I'm grateful for the technology that has allowed us to see each other during the pandemic through Zoom or Microsoft Teams or Google Hangouts, what have you. But it started to weigh on me. And I had always realized for years that anything good that ever happened to me happened to me because of my connections. So that is one of the reasons or many of the reasons I put forth the book. And lastly, I founded my company at age 48, almost nine years ago. And about 90% of our business has been inbound. So what that taught me, or showed me, and demonstrated to me, that the people I met in my twenties, in my thirties, a good part of my forties, have come back. Okay? Maybe not directly to do business with us, but recommending us. So all that time and effort spent on connecting, taking meetings, making introductions, actually was a tremendously financially rewarding investment in time.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Not to mention psychologically fulfilling as well. I mean, there's a psychic impact. There's an emotional and mental health impact. There's so many different dimensions to this topic, which I know we'll get into. But let's dig in, Susan, to the meat of the book. You break it down into three sections. Let's dig into these sections of the book and why you structured it this way. The first is gathering. What do you mean by gathering?

Susan McPherson:

Well, the first person you gather with is the most important person in your life, and that is yourself. And you really do an intentional audit to find out what you're super powers are, what your secret sauces are, what your chief differentiating factors are. Because one of the underlying factors of the entire book is flipping connecting and networking on its head and leading with how can I be helpful to others versus what we have traditionally thought when we walked into rooms, what we can get. How can this person help me? How can this person get me that next thing? So in other words, to be able to learn how to be helpful to others, you have to

do that audit to find out what it is that you bring to the table. Also in the gather phase, you think about who do you intentionally want to connect with or reconnect with that are going to help you meet your goals over the next, let's say, one year, two years, four years?

And also during the gather phase, you think about how you're going to break that hermetically sealed bubble that so many of us live in, myself included, that we tend to attract people towards us who look like us, sound like us, same race, age, and color as us. Because if we don't break out of that, we don't expand. We don't learn anything new. We don't learn anything about ourselves. So, that is very much the gather phase. Once you do that, you go to the ask phase. And in the ask phase, you consciously think about the questions you're going to ask others so that you can find out what they're our hopes and dreams and goals are for the next six months, one year, two years. And if you listen very carefully when you make those asks, which many of us are woefully bad at doing, again, myself included, then you can go to the do phase, which is my favorite place.

And that's where you take everything you heard, you listened to, you made note of, and you become a person who follows through, follows up, becomes responsible and reliable and trustworthy, which quite frankly is the best place to be. Right? I'm not suggesting we do this every day for every moment of the rest of our lives, but I think it's something if we consciously and are intentionally thinking about, we can be much more successful in building meaningful connections.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, I love that. So many people have, including the renowned behavioral psychologist Adam Grant, described you personally as “a super connector.” Maybe talk about how you first learned this skill and how it became so fundamental to who you are.

Susan McPherson:

Well back in the sixties, late sixties early seventies, when I was growing up in upstate New York, I was the child of two serial connectors using the technology at the time, the automobile, the rotary telephone that was attached to the wall, and the scissors and a manual typewriter. But every morning at the breakfast table, I would vie for real estate for my bowl of cereal or cinnamon toast because my parents would have the five local newspapers plus yesterday's or the day before's New York Times and Boston Globe, because they came via the mail so they would come a day or two late. And they'd be flipping and cutting and then going to their respective typewriters and sending off short missives to people in their lives. Whether in my dad's case, he was a college professor at a women's college for almost 40 years, so he would

have students and he would have their daughters and he would have their granddaughters, and over his entire career he stayed in touch with them.

Susan McPherson:

And my mother did PR for various PBS stations, so she would be typing to journalists, to colleagues, to family, to relatives. And every morning there would be this stack of envelopes that would go out into the US postal mail. And I assumed everybody's parents did that. So that was embedded in me. Also embedded in me, and maybe because my dad was such a learner, was this notion of every single person is a conduit to something else, to someone else, to something that we're going to learn. So they embedded in me this sense of curiosity but also this notion that no matter who someone is, they're deserved of our interest, our compassion, our kindness, and our curiosity. And that has stayed with me all these years later.

I love meeting people. And the beautiful thing is we do don't know what we don't know. Just because somebody has a particular role at a company or a nonprofit or a restaurant doesn't mean that person cannot be of interest. And we just don't know what we don't know. And thankfully so because that's what makes life exciting. And then I got my first fax machine at the end of the late eighties, early nineties, and I was like a kid in a candy store because all of a sudden I could clip articles and I didn't have to go to the manual typewriter, you know, the whole thing. And then of course the internet happened and then social media. So looking back now at the last 30 years, these technology tools have enabled us to be much better connectors, but it's also enabled us to be less intentional. Right?

You can whip off a note on a social media platform and it can be harmful. I want to take back the humanity. I'm not saying do away with technology. And in 2007 I went away with seven girlfriends and the goal of that weekend was to deliberately create and articulate our elevator speeches, or what now I call our superpowers. And that was kind of at that beginning of when it became really important if you walked in a room you basically very succinctly were able to say who you are and kind of what your, again, what your benefits are that you bring to the table. And it was that weekend that I actually had the guts to be able to say, because I was with seven girlfriends, "Hi, I'm Susan McPherson and I'm a serial connector." And then of course I wanted to pee in my pants because it sounded so ridiculous.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Why was that so hard? Because that was clearly something that was core, this was really core to you and it was part of your, I mean in some respects, probably part of your DNA, but it was

certainly part of your socialization, right, because of the example that your parents set. So why was it so hard for you to embrace something that honestly seems pretty obvious.

Susan McPherson:

I think because there wasn't a role that I had already seen that someone had set. Right? You know, like somebody says, "I'm a teacher," or "I'm an excellent teacher," or "I'm a serial entrepreneur." Those are terms that I had heard, but it's not like you can... I hadn't even thought about what the ramifications are for it.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

It's not a profession, right? It's not a lawyer, a doctor, a teacher.

Susan McPherson:

Exactly. Because what you normally say when you're like, hi, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But then 16 years later I wrote the book on it. So in some ways it's that self-fulfilling prophecy if you put it out there. But I talk in the book about when you're on the journey to find out what your superpowers are, one of the best ways to do so is to ask your loved ones. Ask the people that care about you. Laura Cox Kaplan:

Let's go back to social media for a moment because I know you're a fan and you use it very creatively, but let's talk about maybe some specific ways that our listener can really utilize social media for a more impactful connection. It doesn't have to be negative. In fact, it can be incredibly positive, but let's talk about what some of those examples might look like.

Susan McPherson:

Well first and foremost, listen. Apply the rule that I've always said, we have two ears and one mouth, to your social media platforms. Okay? You can learn a lot about someone by not only reading their feed but then engaging with them. Growing up, I mean I got on Twitter very early when it was very different than it is now, but I used it very much as a tool to showcase others and to connect others because it's magical like that. But you can't do that if you don't do the proper research before.

And I often say the most important thing to do is before you reach out to somebody is take five to 10 minutes and look up their profile on LinkedIn, look up their profile if they have one on Instagram, heck, look up TikTok if they're dancing on TikTok. Because, what's helpful to find is what I like to call the commonalities and the uncommonalities, so that when you are then in

touch with somebody, you can shine back on them something you learned about them, because I think that's a gift we can give one another. Like Laura, I'm going to forever remember that you told me your first role was an intern on Capitol Hill. I immediately saw a commonality because my first role out of college graduating with a degree in history, and nobody would hire you in the eighties, was an internship with Ted Kennedy.

And regardless of your political sway, he was a magnificent man to work for because you were right at the epicenter of everything happening. But I often say there's a special, I don't want to call it a club because it sounds so exclusive, but people who've done internships on Capitol Hill, it gives you such an appreciation of both how our government works and how our government doesn't work.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Absolutely.

Susan McPherson:

So in other words, but you probably somewhere in your bio or on your LinkedIn, you probably have that, right? I would zero in on that and when I reached out I'd be like, "Laura, we share something."

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. I love that because it also goes to showing respect for the person that you are trying to connect with, right, to understand who they are as people to spend the time and do the background research to just understand what she's about, what she's working on, what she's done in her life, points of connection, points of similarity. I just think it's such an important component of really forging that because you show you care.

Susan McPherson:

A hundred percent and it is the greatest gift we can give one another. I joke, but after I worked for the Senator, I ended up, my first real job was at USA Today and I would do research before I had to interview people. My name was at the bottom of many of the articles that I would research and I would have the Encyclopedia Britannica and the Yellow Pages to research people. Now, you have everything.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Right. It's amazing.

Susan McPherson:

I mean, yes, there will always be that one person who you can't find anything on, but generally speaking you can find their career trajectory on LinkedIn. You can find out if they have grandchildren or children on Instagram. You can find out what they're upset about on Twitter.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

And it's pretty illuminating for the people, if you're looking for someone and there's no social profile, that too can be illuminating in terms of understanding a little bit more about them. Right? There's a reason why they're deciding not to have any participation in this particular set of platforms, right, for better or worse.

Susan McPherson:

A hundred percent.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Okay, so interesting. So let's talk, Susan, a bit about COVID overhang, for lack of a better term [crosstalk 00:16:05] and some of... or that hangover maybe... some of the challenges that organizations continue to have as we've gone back to work. To one degree or another, some organizations are still hybrid. This tends to be something that for tenured employees is much easier to manage than for somebody who's just entering the workforce. So, maybe advice for how to strike that balance and how to really connect, especially with younger employees who may be just getting their start. They don't have connections, they don't have opportunities to interact other than through technology perhaps. I mean, again, there's just a range, a world of differences that organizations are sort of grappling with. But in many cases what I'm hearing about, the frustration is how do we manage and create a culture for younger employees when we're not fully back in an office setting?

Susan McPherson:

And I don't know if we're ever going to be. I think this is a new future rather than recreating the past. First and foremost for listeners who are managing people or leaders in the organization, the onerous is on you. And I don't mean to be that bold, but you are going to have to do everything in your power to help connections flourish. A connected workforce is a far more productive, successful, happier, much more likely to stay, and quite frankly healthier. We know that deeply meaningfully connecting among humans lengthens our lives in all the research. So number one, if you want a healthy workforce, you have to make this a priority. Meaning, don't

just relegate the getting together to happy hours and the annual sales meeting or the annual conference. You need to have inflection points and they can be done virtually.

It's definitely not replacing the eye contact and the in-person hugs and things, but until it's totally safe to do that it's a good alternative. But I think also, ask your new employees, encourage them to let them tell you how they want to be connected or introduced. And then help your younger employees, have someone like me or someone else come in and talk to them about how they can start the process of making connections. Because oftentimes when you're a new employee at a company, you're paired up, you go through onboarding, but we tend to think about what we can gain. And I ask the same thing I ask in the book in terms of leading with how we can be helpful. Even if you're a young, new employee, you have superpowers to bring to the table. So when you reach out to meet with people, to learn about their roles and find out how they can be helpful to you, flip the switch and be like, "Hi, I know you're in finance, I'm in marketing. I want to learn more about your role so I can better support you."

Okay? And set yourself, I know this can be hard if you're introverted or shy, but set yourself a goal to reach out to one or two new people every week for five minute phone calls or five minute donut chats on Slack, or five minute Zoom calls. But the thing is, not everyone you're going to click with, of course, but by doing that you are going to better yourself as an employee, you may have a little bit of fun and you'll be helping the organization because you'll be able to cross pollinate. But it has to come from the top and it has to be a priority.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. I love that.

Susan McPherson:

And it can't just be like happy hours.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, yeah. I love that. And it also, I think, is a great sort of segue if you will, to how we can make and be more intentional about making time for connection and really thinking proactively about this, whether it's in the business setting or the personal setting. I was reminded as I read this part of your book, and you may have even referenced this I can't remember, but you know, James Clear wrote the book Atomic Habits and it occurred to me that so much of, it's making the time and the space for actually doing this and being proactive about it. Maybe talk a little bit about that piece and how you can, how you can make the space and really dedicate yourself to this idea of connecting.

Susan McPherson:

Well, Laura, first of all, people have to understand what the value is. And that's why I tell the story about the 90% of our business has been inbound, because I think sometimes people are like what's the point? Right? I'll meet people gradually, et cetera. You're missing out on so many opportunities that you can't even imagine, and I can only say that at 57, I probably couldn't say that at 30. I didn't have that 30 years of kind of wisdom from experience. But I also think, I'm often asked where do you have time to do all this, blah, blah, blah. I have baked it in. I say oftentimes I have time to brush my teeth. I do that every day. I brush my hair, although I probably need to brush it a little bit more today.

During the pandemic I have been completely alone. I don't have parents, I don't have children, I don't have a significant other. I have a wonderful dog but we speak a different language. So every morning I would reach out to three to five people in whatever means struck me, WhatsApp, text, phone, email, yelling out the window, and my goal was threefold. One, put a little joy in the world because it was a pretty miserable time. Two, let people know I was thinking of them, and three, flay my hands up in the air and say, "Hey, I'm still here. Don't forget me." Now for your listeners, I'm not suggesting everybody does that, but maybe do one a day. Okay? Maybe do two a week, but set yourself a goal because we all know how wonderful it is when you get that text or you get that email that doesn't give you an action, but just says, "Laura, I'm thinking of you." And it's like an immediate dopamine and we need more about in the world.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. I love that. And you hit on so many things that really resonated with me. That's beautiful what you just said. But it also strikes me too, that one of the challenges is to make connecting quantifiable, to be able to show an ROI as it relates to that. We all know, right, intellectually, that there's tremendous value in this, but sometimes it's what gets short shrift because there's not maybe an immediate payoff. And that's why we can fall into that trap of, okay, it's just about me or I have these goals and so I'm going to talk to these people as opposed to thinking about it a bit more broadly and maybe holistically. Right?

Susan McPherson:

Exactly, exactly. Well, and that's how I differentiate connecting with networking. Networking is very immediate. It's very transactional. And believe me, I'm not anti-networking. We have to do it. But connecting is over the long haul. It's reciprocal. You could go a year and then you would be back with someone and you would be still connected. Right? It's not based on this tit for tat,

pardon the expression but that's what came to mind. And life happens, things ebb and flow. There are times when you can't be helpful. But I'm a big believer in being direct and saying that, I can't be helpful right now but I'm coming back to you in a couple of months when things settle down, when my mother is feeling better. And then I calendarize it, I put it in my calendar to get back to that person.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. I love that. You also touched on something that I know you talk about a good bit in the book, which is this difference between networking and connecting, but how you can use your tips and advice on connection to really have a more productive networking experience. Right? Maybe talk a little bit about what that looks like and a couple of specific tips and suggestions that you can give. Well, really it's around this idea of curiosity and asking questions, which you touched on, but maybe talk a little bit about that and give us some examples.

Susan McPherson:

Absolutely. And this is so much fun. Thank you, Laura.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Oh, you're so welcome. I love having you.

Susan McPherson:

Thank you. Well, I often say anything but the weather talk. In the eighties, before I worked for Senator Kennedy, I lived in Denmark. I did a year abroad and I lived with a wonderful Danish family, who by the way I'm still in touch with all these years later, 30 some odd... I don't even want to say how many years... but my Danish father always said to me, with his very thick Danish accent, "You Americans, you don't like silence and you just talk about the weather to fill the air." And oh my God, Laura, all these years later, long before Zoom chats, we'd be on conference calls waiting for the host. Guess what people talk about?

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Oh yeah.

Susan McPherson:

Whether it's raining in Chevy Chase, whether it's snowing in Cleveland, and guess what? Nothing happens. We don't glean anything. We don't learn anything about each other. And

nothing about the weather.. So I learned to start with icebreakers or asking questions that might just elicit a little more information, but also the onerous is on us to also share a little bit more information. Now, I want to segue to one quick important point, and that is not everyone safe sharing, and I get that. And this goes back to what I was mentioning earlier about having leadership at the organization helping people feel comfortable. Then you can encourage dialogue using more meaningful questions.

One of my favorite ones, and this isn't something I would start out if I met somebody at an event or an overall Zoom, but with my team, one of my loved to ask questions, what was your favorite food as a child? Which is a safe question to ask somebody, it's not so probing that you would make somebody feel uncomfortable, but it also then gives you such a sense of where they came from, their loves, their dreams. Because we tend to look back, for the most part, with fond memories. I mean obviously give and take. But in the book I have a chapter that I think lays out 11 questions that you can have in your back pocket when you run into that awkward situation where it's like, oops, what are we going to talk about?

And use the pandemic, talk about it. This is the great equalizer. I mean, yes, it had disastrous effects on large swaths of the population, but it affected us all regardless. Okay? And I think you can certainly open a conversation with now that we're getting beyond the pandemic, is there somewhere you want to go? Is there somewhere on the planet, if finances weren't an option, where would you go? Or, if you could solve one problem in the world in the next year what would it be? And why? See these questions help elicit just a little bit deeper information Now for people who are shy or introverted, there is something... back to this doing research before you go to an event... we happen to have a gift that we can find out who's going to be in the room. Not always. But my suggestion is do a little bit of research beforehand and go with what I call the triumvirate, the power of three.

Go with the intention to meet three people, share three things about yourself and then learn three things. And then, you can go hide in the bathroom. So in other words, be intentional, be mindful, don't overwhelm yourself. Right? Something like that, maybe it's two, maybe it's four, but that way at the end of the evening or the lunch, and again this can be done online too, I think you feel more empowered.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love that. One of the other things you talk about in the book that I especially love and it's actually come up in several different conversations with powerful women who I've talked to, is using this question of how can I help, as something that you answered in all of these conversations to really help you forge that connection, talk about why that's important.

Susan McPherson:

Well, I personally... Let me caveat, I don't walk around a room and just say to everybody, "How can I help? How can I help?" It's more about listening to the signals, the answers that help you to think about how you can be helpful. And I just personally believe it's human. It's kind. And quite frankly, who doesn't need help right now? Okay? And I want to remind people, help isn't writing a check for a million dollars or meeting with somebody for three hours. Nobody has time. But it could be an introduction. It could be a recommendation for a nonprofit that the person might find incredibly valuable. It could be a podcast that person might like, okay? Don't overthink these things. I liken it to almost the breadcrumbs over time, it's the little things you do along the way. Or, if we flip the switch, little asks we make along the way, because it's a heck a lot easier to ask for help when you've been helpful yourself.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Absolutely. Let's talk a little bit about the flip side of asking for help and how the act of asking can actually be helpful in terms of forging a relationship. Maybe talk a little bit about that.

Susan McPherson:

Well, I call it the five minute ask, and that is how you, over time... and again, remember this isn't immediate. I mean, sometimes it can be, but this is over the long haul. You build interest in your endeavors with others by keeping them posted on things that you're doing and making small asks along the way, as opposed to making the huge ask right up front. All right? We all know what that is likened to, right, if I equate it to the dating world, right? And it's much better if you can, again, back to that analogy of the breadcrumbs, if people have an engaged interest in what you're doing they are much more likely to respond. I'm also a big believer, because I know how hard it is for many of us to ask for help, is give people choices.

In other words, it doesn't have to be just one because then I do believe it raises the risk, it increases your risk, excuse me, of being ghosted. Right? You get an ask, you receive it, and you're like, "I can't do that." So it's much easier to hit delete than to respond and say, "You know what, Laura, I just can't do that right now." But instead, if you were to say, "I'm working on this initiative. I would love if you might be able to help in one of the three following ways." Therefore, it gives the person choices, which again, I'm not going to guarantee the person's going to respond, but it's much more likely that they do.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

That's excellent, excellent advice. Maybe let's talk specifically about the fact that so many people are doing career pivots, big life shifts as a result of COVID. A big part of my audience falls in that sort of realm, COVID aside, of women that oftentimes are transitioning either out of or back into the workforce after taking a break sometimes, or many who are transitioning into maybe a second or third act and looking for something interesting. Maybe let's talk about when we reach out to someone for help around getting ideas and kind of fine tuning what we might want to do, maybe perspective on how to make those interactions as impactful as possible so that you're not just getting information but you're actually forging a relationship with the person potentially.

Susan McPherson:

Sure. Well, not to sound like a broken record, but do your research. Find some commonality or find some way you can be helpful to them, because if we are career switching, moving in to a new endeavor, we are going to need help. But if we lead with, "Hi, can I pick your brain? I want to get into this." That's an immediate kind of turnoff. Look, everybody's going to do it a few times, but I think if you can lead with some way you can be helpful to that person, whether it's, "Hi, I notice you just got a promotion and I happen to know somebody who is looking to go work for your company and I'd be happy to make an intro. And oh, by the way, I am also looking to get into your field." See what I'm saying? I mean, I'm being kind of silly, but ... make it more about the other person than me, me, me. I think your chances, again, of the person being responsive and open... I also think it can be very direct. Maybe state, "I understand how busy you are. Maybe you don't have time for a meeting, but maybe we can have a seven to 10 minute phone call and I can send you the questions ahead of time." Make it so it's easier for the other person. And I don't want to overwhelm people to think you have to go through all these hooplas, but if you're reaching out to somebody cold, it's definitely going to increase the chances that that meeting's ever going to even happen. Again, we have so many resources at our disposal to do research before we reach out. The week of my book launch, which was last, early April 2021-

Susan McPherson:

I'm very open to meeting with people and oftentimes I try to, I mean I know we all are going a thousand miles a minute, but you mentioned Adam Grant. In his first book, he talked about actually being more efficient by accepting meetings because it made him manage his time better. But I received a note that week and it was a big week, there was a lot going on. There were a lot of interviews, et cetera. And a lovely woman emailed and said, "Dear Susan, I heard you speak a couple of years ago at XXX conference. I'm just finishing my MBA and I want to pick

your brain about blah, blah, blah." Now, I am nobody famous. But had she just maybe said, "Congratulations on your book. Is there anything I can do to be helpful?" It would've been a much better moment. Right? And I thought about it and I thought about it and I thought about it and I wrote her back and I said, "Thank you for reaching out. I appreciate you. I want to offer you some positive, constructive feedback."

I can't believe I did this. My late father like jumped into my head. But I said, "I launched a book this week, my schedule is really crazy. But in the future, may I suggest do you know the following?" And she wrote me back and thanked me, et cetera, and we eventually met, but again, I want to caveat this that I'm not like I needed this whole kind of stroking my ego. It wasn't anything like that. But I think it was a teachable moment where she could have done it in a different way then I think it would've been much more positive. Only that week, I mean the next week the book launch is done.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Well, it says a lot about the person when they don't do that. And so I think from the standpoint of the person listening to this conversation, it says a lot about you when you don't go the extra mile, even if the person you're reaching out to doesn't, like Susan did, give you that constructive feedback back to say, "Hey, I would've put you in higher esteem had you done just a little bit of research," or just extended that graciousness, if you will, because it's really about graciousness and respect for the person that you're asking a favor of.

Susan McPherson:

Right, right. That's such a good way to put it. And of all weeks, you know what I'm saying? Like any other week I would've been like, whatever, but I was like this is my one moment.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Right, right. I love that. I love that you were direct and you provided the feedback, because honestly, if the person had never heard that, that's a real gift. It can be hard to hear that, right, and probably stung a little bit, but at the same time you can use it as a real teachable moment.

Susan McPherson:

Absolutely.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

You pose in the book a number of questions that the reader can really hone in on how to think about their connecting strategy. And one of the questions is to list the three most meaningful business relationships that they have had. Why is understanding this important? And then I'd love for you to share any personal perspective that you have on your own?

Susan McPherson:

Well, it sets a pattern. I mean, I think it also, again, goes back to that notion that this is a valuable use of time. When you think about the three most, and there's probably many more than three, that have had an impact on your life professionally, and dare I say personally because those lines are blurring and blurring and blurring. I mean, I'm in my living, you look like you might be in part of your house. I have my dog passed out on my couch. But by doing that exercise, we realize just how vitally important these people are and how much influence they have had. So I encourage people to do that so that then they are continuously motivated to continue. Right? So that is why. And I mean, again, I am so grateful that I built up so many relationships because I never would've been a successful entrepreneur. I had no training. I don't have an MBA. I can't manage a spreadsheet for the life of me.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Can we shift and talk a little bit about your career journey? You talked a bit about starting at USA Today. Maybe walk us through your career journey and when did entrepreneurship become something that you wanted to pursue and why?

Susan McPherson:

Never. It never became that. It was a placeholder. But I have had always marketing communications. I run a company now that does social impact communications, but I always had one foot out the door in philanthropy. I was always volunteering for nonprofits. And then as I became more senior, I was able to join the boards of some nonprofits, which really helped me see this whole notion of corporate social impact, where companies would be stepping up with employee volunteering programs, et cetera. But I was at USA Today for four years on the editorial side. The last year I moved on to the marketing side. I was in my mid twenties. And then I joined a company called PR Newswire and I was with PR Newswire all total 17 years. But I had a five year stint in the middle where I went to a technology company, Concur Technologies.

Then I went back and I was with PR Newswire another eight years. But again, always when I wasn't at my day job... or night, we were always working around the clock... but I would end up volunteering serving on boards. And then the last career or move that I did before

starting my company, I was working for Fenton Communications, which had for you years worked with NGOs and nonprofits on how they communicate PR, social media, digital, et cetera. And towards the end of my journey with them, there was a number of people leaving. And in the consulting world, and you may know this from your time at PWC, when a number of people leave there's kind of a red light goes off in your head thinking I need to start thinking about what I'm doing next.

So a couple of nonprofits who I had gotten to know, they weren't clients of Fenton, said, "If you leave, Susan, we'll hire you for a few months." So that gave me the runway and I left on a Friday and I started McPherson Strategies on a Monday because I was so afraid they were going to change their mind. And I often joke Laura that I named it McPherson Strategies because it was just a placeholder until I found my next job. And now 15 employees later, and nine years later and 15 employees, and amazing clients, I kind of joke because it's my ex-husband's name. We divorced in 2003. A great guy, but still I would never have named it that, it's so narcissistic and I'm an anti-narcissist.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love that. Is there anything you wish, besides the name, anything else that you wish you had known before you, in your case, really fell into an entrepreneurial role?

Susan McPherson:

Was there a moment that I believe?

Laura Cox Kaplan:

No, no. Is there something that you wish you had known sort of looking back?

Susan McPherson:

Everything, that it was going to become something and I would've come up with a more creative title. That I would've been much more rigorous on filing. Things have gotten lost, filing papers. What else? Oh, everything, everything, accounting. You name it. I mean, you name it I've done it wrong. Better legal counsel. I think most importantly, I think because it wasn't an intentional, like I'm building this business, I didn't set up all the systems in the right place. But on the same token, it's been a wonderful learning experience. I will say one of the best moves I made was hiring people that are really good at doing everything that I suck at.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. And that's really the secret. Right? That's really the secret to success. Know what you're good at and know what you're not good at and find the people who can help you to do things that you're not good at. Right?

Susan McPherson:

A hundred percent.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, yeah. Okay, Susan, just a couple more things here before I let you go. One thing that got my attention that I thought could use a little perspective around is this idea of always take the meeting. And I know for so many women listening, saying no is already something that they don't necessarily do all that well, that they're much more likely to do things that maybe they either shouldn't do or don't really want to do because they feel like they should do them. Maybe talk about striking the right balance between this notion of always taking the meeting and balancing that in cases when maybe you really shouldn't, or maybe you should say no to certain things.

Susan McPherson:

And I'm not suggesting you take every meeting, that's the title of the chapter. The important point is to be very upfront and intentional. When somebody comes to you and asks you to meet, what is it the person wants to accomplish? Because you may be able to accomplish it over the phone. I mean, it may be a five minute phone call. It may be an email. It may be just an introduction. So I think not to put the onerous on you, the person asking, but I think if the person isn't explicit, ask them to be. Okay? And if you can't do it and you have some interest, again not everybody, but I encourage you to kind of look beyond this person can't help you because you just don't know, if you can't do it, calendarize it and come back to the person a few months later.

I had a number of hospital stints last year on top of launching the book. It was very challenging and I could not be the typical helpful Susan, but I was also very conscious about the fact that I couldn't be and I calendarized. In August when I was much better, I saw reach out to Linda, contact Sean. And by doing that, I continued to be in the do phase. And again, I want to caveat all of this, that I know how busy people are. These are tips that you can take and use when they make sense for you.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, just lots and lots of, yeah, lots and lots of options for ultimately connecting. Okay, because influence is such an important theme in what we talk about here at She Said She Said, maybe give me your definition of how you think about influence and what it means to you?

Susan McPherson:

I think about influence having the power and capacity to make impact, on yourself, on others, on the people you love, on the people that you haven't even met yet.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love that. That's great. Before I let you go, maybe one single piece of advice, a life hack or a mantra, maybe it's something that you wish you could tell 22 year old Susan as she was just getting started.

Susan McPherson:

Get rid of your preconceived notions. The beautiful thing is you don't know what you don't know. And if you walk through life with those, you are missing out on so much wonder, curiosity and fulfillment. So get rid of them.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love that. It's beautiful. Susan, thank you so much. I really loved the conversation. It's great to connect with you.

Susan McPherson:

I know we have to meet in person-

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I would love that.

EPISODE CLOSE:

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Friend thanks so much for tuning in today for Episode 191 with Susan McPherson. Again her book is called ""The Lost Art of Connecting: the Gather, Ask, Do Method for Building Meaningful Relationships.""

SHE SAID/SHE SAID PODCAST WITH LAURA COX KAPLAN [here](#).

I'd love to hear what you thought about Susan's perspective, and if her three part strategy is something that you might incorporate into your own life. Be sure to send me a note and let me know. You can reach me on Instagram or Linked In at LAura Cox Kaplan or via our website at she said/she said podcast .com

Most of all friend, i hope you found this conversation a good and valuable investment in YOU!

Until next week, take care.

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