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CHRIS DAVIS: Welcome to the Career and Academic Resource Center podcast. I'm your host, Chris Davis, the associate director of the Career and Academic Resource Center here at Harvard Extension School. It is my great pleasure today to be speaking to Muriel Wilkins, the host of the Harvard Business Review *Coaching Real Leaders* podcast.

Muriel holds an MBA from Harvard Business School, a marketing degree from Georgetown University, and a leadership coaching certification from Georgetown. She is the managing partner and co-founder of Paravis Partners-- I hope I've pronounced that correctly-- an executive coaching and leadership development firm.

And she is a c-suite advisor and executive coach, helping take high-performing senior leaders to the next level. On the *Coaching Real Leaders* podcast, which I sincerely hope you all listen to-- it's a wonderful podcast-- Muriel speaks to real senior leaders about topics ranging from career changes to navigating the challenges of senior roles and managing direct reports with their own challenges to overwork and burnout, leading authentically, how to overcome being defensive, and many other issues that leaders face.

It is a great honor to have her here with us today. Welcome, Muriel.

MURIEL WILKINS: Thank you, Chris. I'm so excited to be here with you.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you so much. So yeah. I wanted to start off-- I think the issues that you speak about in your-- and that your background is heavily involved with would be something that traditional college students would not be facing or interested in.

But as our students know, our population, our demographic of students, of adult continuing lifelong learners-- we have students who are pursuing undergraduate and graduate degrees and graduate certificates who are already in senior level roles or mid-career roles, transitioning to or looking to transition to senior level or c-suite opportunities.

Many times, that happens for our students while they're in their degree programs here. So the professional component of this is certainly very relevant to our student population. I wanted to start off today asking you something that is directly related-- correlated to that. So as we know, grades in courses don't translate, don't correlate with job performance in the professional world.

But certainly, as I just said, our students, they're holding full-time, often very complex professional roles while raising families. So they're pursuing education while juggling their other commitments in their lives. And one of the things that we certainly try to share with students-- and they always ask about, how can I position the skills that I've used to succeed, excel in my professional role while also juggling the other academic priorities and other commitments in my life?

How can I build language that is going to add to my repertoire of professional experience to show that I'm mission driven, that I'm purpose driven, that I can juggle multiple priorities? What would you suggest in situations like that?

**MURIEL
WILKINS:**

Sure. And I think that this is a question that one needs to ask themselves all along their career path, whether they are early in their career, mid-level in their career, senior in their career. It's a question I ask myself. And I think if I can reframe it in a way, it's almost a question of, what's the value that I'm bringing to the table, to the room, to the meeting, to my role, to the organization, to the industry-- and I love being really aspirational-- to the world?

And so when you think about it that way, I think the place to start in terms of how-- what's the language, as you put it, how do I harness? What do I have? You have to start with, what's the impact that you're looking to make? And so for example, in concrete terms, if you have a team that you're managing, what is the impact that you're looking to make at that team?

If you're responsible for a particular division or initiative within your company, what's the impact that you're looking to make with that division and with that unit within your company? If you have your own business, what's the impact that you're looking to make in your business or through your business?

And if you can start with the impact, then you can dial it back and take an inventory of all the things that you're doing, whether it's what you're learning through your continuing education experience, what you're doing on the job, what you're doing outside of the job-- whether it's parenting or volunteering or sitting on boards or-- whatever it might be-- hobbies that you have.

And you bring that whole experience to bear to really create a narrative of how all of that sums up to being able to make that final impact. I'll use myself as an example. While I'm a coach and I work-- my whole mission and the impact that I want to make is to really help people lead and live with just a little bit more ease.

And so what I bring to bear-- yes, obviously, is my experience in terms of having coached people in the past, but I also-- it's also supported by the business experience that I had previous to entering this career, because I made a career change. And I also bring to bear my life experiences.

And so I think as somebody who is going down their own career, you want to take inventory of everything that you're doing and match it up with impact and then say, OK, what's the story here? What are the three or four pieces that I can pick up that really help inform how I do the work and how I meet those goals?

And that takes some time, some reflective time, to sit back and think through all that. It's not something that just naturally comes out of your mouth.

CHRIS DAVIS:

That is so true, and I think borne out by-- experience conversations that I've certainly had with students. Yeah, it doesn't come naturally to a lot of us. And I think that precisely what you had touched upon, building a narrative is so key for a lot of folks. They might tend to see their lives in different chunks, what they bring to their professional selves, all of that.

And lifelong learning, their continuing-education experience, and the skills that they've used to juggle that with the other priorities that they have and to excel in all of that is certainly part of the narrative that everyone should be thinking about at their own individual level.

**MURIEL
WILKINS:**

Yeah. And I think, Chris, what tends to happen are two things. One is we tend to focus on the skills that we don't have rather than the ones that we do have. So were-- what I find that people have-- they'll look at, well, here's what I want to do. Here's the value I want to bring. Here's the impact I want to make. But oh my goodness, I haven't done this and I haven't done that.

And rather than reframing and starting from a place of, well, what have I done? What have I done or what am I capable of doing based on what I've done in the past? That then helps meet that need. And then I can-- obviously, there might be other places where I need to fill the hole, but let's start with what you can actually do rather than what you can't do. So that's number one.

I think number two is people tend to not look for analogous experiences. So they tend to look for, oh my goodness, have I done this exact same thing before so that I can speak to it and show and demonstrate that I can then take on this role or do this job? And quite frankly, there is never the exact same thing.

So part of it is looking in what is the analogous skill or behavior or activity that I've done that can be transferred to this type of situation? And I think when people start looking at it that way, it opens up a lot more possibilities around what they bring to bear.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you for that. Yes. So on a slightly different track but related to this-- there's an explosion of articles and studies and surveys in the recent-- in the last year or so that are talking about the different changes and evolutions that the professional world has undergone and is undergoing.

I saw that, earlier this month, there was a study that McKinsey had done that they shared called the Great Attrition is making hiring harder. A lot of these studies, some of these pieces are looking at it from more of the employer side of it. But they're really talking about how people are thinking about work.

We have a lot of students who are transitioning to or looking to transition to more senior-level roles during their academic journey here with us or right directly afterwards. But we also have a lot of students who are coming here wanting to do a career change. That's certainly something we saw before the pandemic, and I think it's just only increased since then.

And a lot of the literature out there is talking about, what are people looking for? One of the direct quotes in that recent McKinsey survey was, "the COVID-19 pandemic has led more and more people to reevaluate what they want from a job and from life, which is creating a large pool of active and potential workers who are shunning the traditionalist path," as they put it.

For students, for professionals who are contemplating a career change or in the midst of a career change, what are some of the pitfalls that you're seeing in your coaching? Are there any new challenges that are popping up in the last year or two? How should people who are mid-career or senior career who are undergoing this process, what are some of the things that you're seeing?

**MURIEL
WILKINS:**

Mm-hmm. OK. So it's interesting because I don't necessarily think that the things that I'm seeing are any different than what I was seeing before. It's just more that it's happening more at scale.

CHRIS DAVIS: Mm-hmm.

**MURIEL
WILKINS:**

There's many more people contemplating career changes. Whereas in the past, it was a few brave souls who would say, I'm going to do a complete pivot. And so now it's kind of become a bit more normalized, and so there's community in that and a lot more resources to figure that out.

And so that's actually a pro. You don't feel as alone in making these types of moves. And so number one is I think-- definitely leverage the fact that there seems to be a whole movement towards evaluating, what am I doing with my career, is this what I want to be doing, and how do I move forward from here. All right. So that's number one.

So the challenges themselves, if I can talk about those, I don't see-- and then the opportunities coming out of those challenges aren't really that different in terms of the pitfalls. I think the biggest pitfall I see when somebody is contemplating a career change is that they're contemplating the career change more as a reaction to what's happening or what has happened in their career rather than as trying to move towards a vision for what they want for their career and, quite frankly, for their life.

And there's a difference there. It's a thin line between the two, but there is a difference. And so it's not to say that you shouldn't make an assessment of what's happened and where you were, but use it to help inform where you move towards rather than as the comparison. It's not about necessarily walking away from something, it's more about walking towards something.

And so what does that mean? I think too many folks spent a lot of time using the career that they've been in or where they've come from as the comparison and as helping shape what they want next rather than really wiping the slate clean and saying, OK. Let me envision what it is that I want for myself.

Again, back to the question of, what kind of impact do I want to make? What type of space do I want to work in? What kind of people do I want to work with? How do I want to do financially? What kind of skills do I want to use? How do I see myself spending my time? And then really creating a vision for that or an image for that.

Vision often sounds like this big word that's unattainable, but an image. What's the idea? What's the concept? And then starting to think, based on that, well, then what kind of roles can I have, what kind of career can I have that fits into that image? So that is probably the biggest thing, is they're not-- they're being reactionary rather than creating something.

And I think a career is actually something that you create that ends up being an expression of what it is that you want to have. That's really what it is. So that's one. I think the second is-- kind of goes back to the first thing that we were talking about, is, once they've done that, they tend to not look at what they have done up until now, and taking inventory to say, OK, well, how does that-- what are the skills and the experiences that then can help me in terms of fulfilling that vision that I want to have?

So that's the second piece, is they disregard and not give any credit to what they've done up until now. So those would-- I say would be the two big pitfalls that I see as they move in that direction. And then there's also the sense that I find people say, OK. I'm making this career change, and I've got to define it for-- this is it for the rest of my life.

And I'm like, not really. Give yourself a bit of slack and cut yourself a bit of Slack and say, OK. This is what it is for the next five years or this is what I think it could be. So you still hold it loosely. And it then realizes that your career is so long that you have opportunities to evolve, quite frankly, a lot over the span of a career.

So don't necessarily think that that stake in the ground that you're putting today is what you have to stick to for the next 20 to 30 years or however long your career span is. Recognize that there's going to be opportunities to continue to change.

CHRIS DAVIS: So finally, Muriel, I wanted to ask you something which is tied into this a little bit too, but I also see from students questions about-- and I certainly don't blame them. I mean, the times are evolving and professional norms, expectations, evolve with that. There are some, quote unquote, "best practices" I think that have been passed on through the years, how important networking is in your career advancement, especially for those who are seeking more senior-level opportunities.

I've seen students who are very uncomfortable with the idea of networking or what they have interpreted over the years as something that's very aggressive. So I wanted to ask you, what are some of the things that you would share-- and also, has the technology made a dent on how people should think about connecting with others in their fields and networking?

In-person conferences are slowly coming back, but there's kind of a new world out there. I think people are connecting in slightly different ways. So how people go about making those connections is probably going to look and feel a little different going forward. What are some of the best practices that you would share?

MURIEL WILKINS: Yeah. So the first place, quite frankly, Chris, is I think you hit the nail on the head around this word "networking" just triggers so many people. So I always offer my clients, if the word doesn't work for you and it triggers, let's come up with a different word.

Because it is something that you want to get comfortable with, but let's make it comfortable on your terms. And what is the outcome, again, that you're looking to achieve? And from my standpoint, when it comes to-- whatever way you want to call it-- when it comes to in terms of advancing your career and being able to find career opportunities, there's two things that need to happen.

One is there needs to be some line of sight and some visibility of who you are and what you're capable of. Otherwise, how is one to know whether you're the right person for that role or you're the right fit for that position? So in what ways-- I try to reframe it with my clients, as in, what ways can we make what you're doing and what your contributions are more visible?

And then number two, who do we need to make it visible to? And that part is the relationship building. And so when we break it down to that, we get rid of this word "networking," and it comes back-- networking is just the activity. It's not even the activity. It's the picture. You have a network. You have this web of relationships or people that you know.

But what is it driving towards? So I think the place to really start in terms of best practice is, why do you need these relationships? What's the-- again, the outcome you're looking to drive to. Let's really be clear about that. Who needs to be in that web? And then it's, OK, how do you cultivate those relationships?

And there's different ways of doing it. One of them is going to conferences and things like that. And yes, they're coming back, which is great. But I can speak for myself. I'm actually a major introvert. And I decided a while back conferences just don't work for me. And do I pay a price for that? Possibly.

But I also realize that I need to compensate for that in some other form or fashion. But the answer of not doing anything from a relationship-building standpoint is not the answer if I want folks to have visibility into my work and I want to be connected to certain individuals or certain groups of individuals that will help in my career.

So I think when we break it down to those two fundamental variables, it's helpful. And then we can determine, OK, out of the list of things that are possible-- conferences, LinkedIn, as you said-- which is an en masse-- putting myself out there to speak, being able to volunteer for a particular board opportunity or another work opportunity, setting up a coffee.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you so much. I think that's one of the dated or inaccurate ideas that a lot of people have. I think they associate networking with something that can be solely transactional, and that's not ultimately what it's about. As you said, it's relationship building. It's longer term than that.

And it also looks different than I think a lot of people-- you touched on something very important. I think-- yeah, for introverts. I think sometimes those opportunities to connect can look different, and that's fine. It's not one size fits all.

MURIEL WILKINS: That's right. I mean, listen. For better or for worse-- I don't actually think there's for worse. As humans, we were connected beings. And so I think when we look at it from that standpoint, we can reframe it. And so did we come up with different ways to connect over the past couple of years because of technology?

Yes. But that doesn't mean those are the only ways to connect. It's an "and." They became additive. It became other ways. And maybe during the pandemic, it was all that we could rely on. But that doesn't mean it's going to stay like that forever.

So it's not a going back to the way that we were doing things and it's not staying in the way that we're doing them now, it's constantly looking for, OK, yes. There's this fundamental need to connect that will be helpful for my career, what are the ways that are going to best help me but also that are helpful to others? And let me pick and choose I don't have to do all of them.

But let me pick and choose two or three rather than sitting back and saying, well, I'm just not going to do anything.

CHRIS DAVIS: That is so true. One thing I've also experienced-- I wonder how you feel about this-- but I think it also very much depends on who you're trying to build a relationship or a network with. The treasured contacts that I have had or maintained over the years-- they're not all the same.

There are some people who prefer the occasional thoughtful email or sometimes jump on a phone call or a Zoom chat. Or when you're in the same city, a quick coffee connection. But yeah, I think the preferences of the other person also play a role in how you're going about doing it.

MURIEL WILKINS: Absolutely. Absolutely, Chris. And I think that's why-- I think if one can get down to some very laser-focused approach-- yes, you might have-- there's connectivity at scale, and then there's, what are the relationships that I'm going to cultivate? And that doesn't happen with a one-time conversation. Cultivation takes time, just like cultivating a plant, cultivating a garden, cultivating a field.

It takes time. There are seasons. There's things you have to do through each of those seasons. And over time, it grows. Sometimes it doesn't. And you keep coming back to it. You keep watering it. And I think the same goes with relationships. But you have to be clear about which ones are the ones that you're looking to cultivate and what is your intention going in.

I think sometimes what holds people back is they are feeling like, I'm just getting something out of it, and that doesn't feel comfortable to me. Well, no. If you go in with a spirit of reciprocity knowing that you're just as willing to support this person as much as you would hope they're willing to support you, then there's a different feel to it.

And then the last thing I'll say on this is I think, particularly from a career management standpoint, one of the biggest relationships that one should be trying to cultivate is of having a sponsor or sponsors, which is a topic for a whole 'nother show that you can do. But if you don't have a sponsor or you don't have sponsors, that is something that you should start intentionally trying to navigate, particularly if you have mentors and how do you turn those mentors into sponsors for you.

CHRIS DAVIS: Well, on that note, I'm going to say, Muriel Wilkins, thank you so much for joining us today and for sharing your wisdom and your experience and your input. I really appreciate it.

MURIEL WILKINS: Thank you. I appreciate you for having me here.

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You have listened to the CARC podcast. This is the podcast for the Career and Academic Research Center here at Harvard Extension School, and I hope you will join us again.