

'Everything that happens to us informs our future

July 15, 2010



Dave Veale interviews Nancy Mathis, Founding Executive Director, Wallace McCain Institute as part of the Leadership Unleashed series of interviews with leaders.

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Dr. Nancy Mathis, founding executive director of the Wallace McCain Institute at the University of New Brunswick, has a BIG mandate - "helping entrepreneurs develop the understanding, tools and relationships needed to grow their businesses, creating new opportunities for economic and social progress across New Brunswick."

'You probably learn more if things don't go the way they're supposed to go, according to your design,' says Nancy Mathis of the Wallace McCain Institute.

So, what does it take to deliver on this commitment? It starts with a leader such as Mathis who understands a thing or two about being an entrepreneur. Mathis has been recognized on a national scale with awards in innovation, entrepreneurship and engineering as well as for supporting others in those fields.

The flagship program at the Wallace McCain Institute is the Entrepreneurial Leaders Program (ELP). When I had the opportunity to deliver a workshop to the most recent ELP cohort - made up of 15 amazing leaders - I was totally inspired by the open, authentic learning environment. Creating this environment requires a leader such as Mathis with a clear, compelling vision. When I had a chance to sit down with Mathis, I started by asking her about her vision for business leadership in New Brunswick.

Q: I echo the New Brunswick Business Council's vision and that's "to make New Brunswick the best place in Canada to start and grow a company." A part of this is having the leaders as an eco system where everything is interconnected. This exists today but enriching it, I think, will be an important contributor to truly making New Brunswick the best place in Canada to start and grow a company.

What type of entrepreneurs are you attracting to your program that will help you realize this vision?

A: ELP helps entrepreneurs who have the tiger by the tail, five to 10 years in the business and are thinking, "Wow. How do I get to that next level of growth? Maybe I should just consider myself lucky that I have gotten this far and coast."

We want to get them right at that intersection, that crossroads in their life, where they have made it. They are likely profitable and we want to keep the gas on and keep them accelerated and growing. Other Wallace McCain Institute programs we offer support everyone from start-ups to multi-generational family companies.

Q: What is the biggest thing you have learned from the leaders in your programs?

A: The big thing is the uniformity within the diversity. For example, there are 15 people every year in the institute's ELP that range from high school graduates to Ph.D.'s. The smallest company had four full-time-equivalent employees; the biggest had 1,000. Some are pre-revenue; some are \$100,000,000. That's the diversity.

The uniformity is in the drive and the passion and it's so visible. It's in their eyes; it's boiling up from their bellies. There is this passion to grow and expand beyond what makes logical sense. There is a grab-the-brass-ring, swing-for-the-fences kind of attitude that has no connection at all from previous experience or business training.

Q: I'd like to ask you about lessons you have learned as a leader. One of the really important and interesting aspects of leadership is resilience and a leader's ability to deal with adversity. When things don't go perfectly for you, how do you respond?

A: It's not just about me, but also something that I see in the entrepreneurs around me. If something goes wrong, it's all encompassing in your world. You feel very exposed, that everybody knows.

The biggest lesson I've learned is that nobody knows. You may be headline news for one or two days, but then other things boot you out of the spotlight.

Everything that happens to us informs our future - good and bad. You probably learn more if things don't go the way they're supposed to go, according to your design. You learn more and that makes you stronger and smarter for the next thing you plan to do, as long as you keep moving forward.

Q: Who has inspired you, Nancy?

A: Frank McKenna ... He's tenacious and like I've heard him say many times, he punches above his weight. You get enthralled. You would follow that man anywhere ... It's the passion, the tenacity. You can see how you can interact with Frank's vision and be part of it.

A very different kind of leader who has inspired me is John McLaughlin, former president of the University of New Brunswick. John's messages and John's vision have been so far-reaching it's really even hard to comprehend how all of the dots connect.

All of the conversation about the future of New Brunswick, the upsurge of the "can do" attitude, 21inc, the NB Business Council and the Wallace McCain Institute all originated with John.

Q: So he planted a seed?

A: He planted seeds in fertile minds that went out and did the work ... it empowered a lot of people to do some really important things.

Dave Veale is a business and leadership coach and founder of Vision Coaching Inc. in Saint John. He can be reached by email at Dave@VisionCoachingInc.com. His column appears every other Thursday. To read past columns go to www.LeadershipUnleashed.ca

Photo: David Smith, Telegraph Journal

Published Thursday July 15th, 2010 in the Telegraph Journal