

John Wright:

Welcome to Business Better, a podcast designed to help businesses navigate the new normal. I'm your host John Wright. For nearly 15 years, I was senior vice president and general counsel at Triumph Group, Inc., a global aerospace components supplier. I'm now a member of the securities and M&A groups at Ballard Spahr, the national law firm with clients across industries and across the country.

John Wright:

This episode features a conversation with Molly Shepard, founder and president of The Leader's Edge, which provides leadership development services to executive and high potential women and men to enhance their effectiveness as senior leaders. Ms. Shepard talks about her career path, the nature and benefits of executive coaching, stakeholder relationships and how they built, the benefits of 360 reviews, and her books and the lessons they teach. Back again, leading the discussion is my Ballard Spahr colleague, Emilie Ninan, a partner in our Wilmington, Delaware and Washington DC offices, and co-chair of Ballard Spahr's finance department. Now, let's listen to Emilie's discussion with Molly Shepard.

Emilie Ninan:

Molly, thanks for joining me today.

Molly Shepard:

Its my pleasure, Emilie. Nice seeing you again.

Emilie Ninan:

Nice to see you. I really enjoy the opportunity this podcast gives me to talk to people who have made a positive difference in my career progression, and you, and The Leader's Edge are certainly at the top of that list.

Emilie Ninan:

As you may recall, I was introduced to your leadership development program in 2004 by a partner who I used to work with. And, it was at a time when I was up for partner at my prior firm. And for me, the program was a great experience. It was only three or four months, but it made me start thinking strategically about my career. And, I had already been practicing for over eight years. So looking back, I had just been doing what was asked of me and navigating around obstacles as they came up. But, what I had not done was anything truly proactive.

Emilie Ninan:

And sometimes I still wonder, like what took me so long? I have a lot of highly educated people in my family, but none of them were lawyers. None of them even worked in corporate America. And, I didn't have a frame of reference as to what was needed to be successful in the law firm environment. And, The Leader's Edge really stepped into that gap for me through assessments and 360 reviews, as well as working through plans and presentations with my cohort. I learned a lot about myself and how I was presenting myself. And even more importantly, how I was perceived in the workplace. And, the cherry on top of all of that was a working one-on-one with my assigned coach, Pat Wiggernhorn, who made my success a priority. And, that was just invaluable.

Emilie Ninan:

So all that to say, Molly, I don't know if you realize the extent of the impact you've had, but I truly appreciate that you started Leader's Edge. I did become a partner that year, actually the first partner of color at my prior firm, and I really credit Leader's Edge for getting me, and frankly the firm, over that final hump. So, thank you.

Molly Shepard:

Well, you're very welcome. And, those are the kinds of stories that we really love to hear. Congratulations. I know you've had a wonderful career since then as well, so very proud of you.

Emilie Ninan:

Oh, thank you Molly. I want to start by asking you how your professional career began. What led you to become the founder and CEO of The Leader's Edge, which now includes Leaders By Design?

Molly Shepard:

Well, it's a long career history, so I'm going to try and cut it short. But, my very first job in Philadelphia, Emilie, you might not even know this, was as a college recruiter. I went to over 400 college and university campuses, interviewed seniors who were looking to at least exploring the career that I was proposing. I was director of admissions for a proprietary institute that started the first paralegal training program in the country. It was based here in Philadelphia. I was very young. I had a big department of recruiters. And, as I interviewed and then counselled these seniors as to what their career options might look like and whether paralegal work fit, I realized they had no support. They had no real idea of what they should do. They hadn't really assessed their strengths and their interests. We look like a nice fix at the time and we were for certain people, but not for everyone.

Molly Shepard:

So, I got my master's degree in counselling psychology to kind of formalize what I was beginning to explore and think about as a career. And, was recruited pretty quickly into Hay, which is an enormous management consulting firm, at least it was at the time, also based in Philadelphia, to start up their career transition business. Counselling executives who had been let go, typically involuntarily. And, this was back in the 80s when reductions in force, rifts were happening all over the place as companies were re-engineering. And as part of that business, I also got into executive coaching leadership development and change management, and left there to start my own company, Manchester, which grew to be a very large consulting firm in that space, outplacement, career development, executive coaching assessment, leadership development. And, had the privilege of selling. It really achieved the American Dream.

Molly Shepard:

But, with that came a five-year non-compete that told me I couldn't do anything for five years. So, I looked around at what would make sense for me, and what would be fun and where I could really add value. And, when I came across the statistics around how women were faring in corporations, organizations, law firms and so on, I was staggered by how poorly we were doing. I'd been coaching women all this time, but hadn't really connected the dots. And, women were not achieving their potential. They were not rising into the executive suite, much less a C-suite. And, I realized that's where I wanted to place my energy and my skills. And, I've never looked back. It's been an enormously rewarding thing. Both, to start a company that's been successful again, two times; and also, to help

women advance their careers. We merged with Leaders By Design in 2005, which was run by Peter Dean and coached men.

Molly Shepard:

And, it was at that time that we realized we really needed to expand our services to include both sexes, because that gave us much more opportunity, as well as information about how the men were feeling about the women and vice versa. So, it just also deepened our credibility in the marketplace. And now, we're a full leadership development, executive coaching firm doing leadership programming, as well as individual coaching like we did with you.

Molly Shepard:

And, just to reflect on that for one minute, Emilie, it is such a wonderful opportunity for someone who hasn't thought about their career, hasn't really reflected on how they got to where they are and where they want to go. Coaching provides that very intimate, discrete space to really look at, am I where I want to be? Am I doing what I want to do? Are my skills and interests matched to my opportunity as best as possible, so I can be successful? And, if I need to make some tweaks in either my career trajectory, or my leadership style, or my behavior to get further, it's just that chance to do that with a coach, as I think you would agree.

Emilie Ninan:

Not everyone who claims to provide executive coaching delivers the same value. Can you give us an example of the content and the time commitment required by one of your current programs?

Molly Shepard:

Well, it is an area of endeavor that a lot of people are jumping into without credentials. And, with the certification programs that have popped up all over the country for coaches don't really screen, as to whether somebody really should be an executive coach. So I would, first of all, say that anybody's interested in doing this and working with a coach should make sure they're looking at coaches who have business experience, who are either certified, have been doing this work for a long time, really know what they're doing and have an excellent reputation for integrity and success. And that said, I believe that the organization should sponsor the individual, because they have an investment in somebody's success. So, we do not work with individuals themselves. We don't take money out of people's pockets. We really ask the company to pay for this as a leadership development process that will enhance their capabilities and success.

Molly Shepard:

And so, it's really figuring out like you did, is this the right time for me to really inquire as to whether this could be available to me, and pitch why it would be helpful to both my career, as well as the success of the firm. We don't have that as many lawyers participating in coaching, as I think we should. Especially when I look at the numbers for women, who have become partners and those numbers are still depressed, and not as large as they should be. And, I would question why that is. Are there women who really aren't seen as rainmakers, and as such partners to be, who could really think about what that means for them, and what they could do differently to maybe change the scenario?

Emilie Ninan:

Yeah. I know when I met you 16 years ago, law firms didn't embrace programs like Leader's Edge, the way corporations did. So, I was fortunate that I had a firm that did sign me up for this program and investment in me that way. My sense is that the legal industry still largely considers these programs to be remedial as opposed to an investment. So, I'm a little disappointed here, you're not seeing as many law firms, because that was going to be one of my questions. Have you seen a greater adoption by law firms in executive coaching and leadership development more recently?

Molly Shepard:

Well, it's a shame that, that's an old paradigm where it was remedial. Certainly when I got into it, almost everybody that it was assigned to me was somebody who had to really do some serious fixing, or they were going to be escorted out the door. And, that has completely changed. Companies and organizations are not investing in those people. And, we won't be used that way either. So, if somebody really is going to be fired, we're not going to be brought in. We won't accept that assignment, because it compromises us, of course. So, the bottom line is organizations are looking at talent and trying to figure out how they can encourage, and enhance the skills, and styles, sometimes as well as the strategic communications, and the impact and presence of people, so that they can step into the executive suite handily with the right intelligence and experience behind them. And it's not remedial, it's really for the people that they really want to invest in for the future.

Emilie Ninan:

Yeah, no, I'm glad to hear that. I didn't know what to expect when I joined the leading up program, but I went into it open and honestly, and was rewarded for that effort. Then my only regret is that I did not continue with any type of coaching after I became a partner, and shame on me after having such a positive experience for not investing in myself that way. I think it would have smooth out some of the bumps I've encountered over the years.

Emilie Ninan:

I just want to go back to the program that I was in, and some of the things that I learned while I was there. One of the activities I did was a stakeholder analysis. And, a surprise for me was how broadly a stakeholder is defined. At work, stakeholders are people who have an interest in my success or failure, or could be impacted by my role, or have an impact on my role. So, I've heard you talk about how building stakeholder relationships at the beginning of a job can make all the difference in ensuring a smooth transition later. Can you expand on what you mean by that?

Molly Shepard:

Well, to get back to... I think something you might have talked about in earlier podcasts, is women tend to really put their head down and work quite hard at what they have to, or what they've been assigned to do, or what they're working on, and don't look around at their landscape as kind of strategically as sometimes their male colleagues do. And so, I've been encouraging women to raise their heads and take a look at who are the key influencers, the decision makers and the people in their organization are, and determine whether or not they have any relationship with them. And if they do, how could that even be better and more productive, both for them as well as for the individual? And, these key influencers and decision makers, and I know they exist at Ballard as well, are sometimes hungry for information around what's going on with clients, what's going on in the marketplace, what's going on in the firm. So, they're often isolated as well.

Molly Shepard:

So, there's a nice symbiotic thing that goes on when you develop stakeholder relationships. But, why they're key for an individual is when you're not in the room and your name comes up for partnership or for just a yearly review, if no one knows who you are, you're not going to be given full due. And, if they know who you are, but they don't know what you've done, then you also may be overlooked. And that's a shame, because you may be doing wonderful things and just no one knows about it.

Molly Shepard:

So, it's really an opportunity to figure out who do I want to get to know and get to know me, so that they're aware of A, who I am, B, what I'm doing and have accomplished and C, where I would like to go. What are my aspirations? Do I want to be a partner? Would I like to be on the management committee of the firm? Would I like to be the chair of the firm? Is that where I'm headed? And, get some thoughts and advice and counsel, and just develop credibility and visibility within the organizations. So, one reason why stakeholder relationships are so key. They're also a wonderful way of learning and growing, and the relationship itself can become quite powerful.

Emilie Ninan:

Yeah. You hear a lot of talk about sponsors. I think of sponsors as someone who speaks for you when you're not in the room. Do you see a difference?

Molly Shepard:

I'm thinking a lot about this, because we're working with another company on a mentoring program. There's a big difference between mentors and sponsors, but they can cross over. So, a mentor is really somebody who is going to give you career advice. Who's going to say, "Your presence in the meetings is really not impactful, or when you walk in the room, we do not see a leader." "Or when you message, it doesn't sound strategic, you talk about yourself and your team, but not the enterprise," or whatever the issue might be. And, those mentors can be very helpful. And, they really should be season people who really are honest and open with advice and feedback, and see you on a regular basis, so they can help you assess your impact.

Molly Shepard:

A sponsor is somebody who advocates for you and your future. Somebody who will step and say, "Emilie is the one we want to head up this initiative." "And, I'll tell you why, she just told me the other day, she's managed this, this and this." "She's got the skills, she's got the interest, she wants to grow, let's give her some exposure." And he or she, may or may not also give you advice, but there's somebody who are in a powerful enough role that they will promote you, given the opportunity.

Emilie Ninan:

Yeah. And, this might be splitting hairs, but do you consider both mentors and sponsors to be stakeholders?

Molly Shepard:

Yes.

Molly Shepard:

Absolutely.

Molly Shepard:

So, [crosstalk 00:18:05] I think when you do your stakeholder analysis, you want to just determine, do I operate in a very small circle just around the people I work with every day, or do I really know other people within the firm, because there's cross selling opportunities? There's other reasons for developing those relationships and make a list of maybe just three people that you would like to get to know who could have an impact on your career, just like I just suggested. But also, where you could both help one another and go for it. Its fun.

Emilie Ninan:

So, another learning from my time in the leading up program was how I should have been using the evaluation process for feedback. As an associate I receive multiple reviews that were basically, "Keep doing what you're doing." And I would respond, "Okay great, thank you," just relieved that there wasn't anything really bad in it.

Emilie Ninan:

What I never said is I want to be a partner here. What do I need to make that happen? What do you need to see from me next? And, you put that together with human nature to avoid difficult conversations. And, it's no wonder it took a third party like Leader's Edge to come in and solicit direct candid feedback through the 360 reviews. Hopefully firms are better at feedback today. I mean, here at Ballard, we now give feedback on a rolling basis. So in theory, there should be no surprise at an annual review. But, what advice Molly do you have for those receiving feedback on how to best use the opportunity to have a productive discussion, whether during the evaluation meeting or even between formal meetings?

Molly Shepard:

Well, I find that giving feedback and receiving feedback is one of the most difficult things for people in management to do. And law firms, it's been notoriously a bad problem. You might have a very season litigator who can't give feedback to one of his or her associates, but can stand up in court and argue anything. So, it's a two-way street. I think the person who wants the feedback should, A, make sure they're getting it. So you say rolling, but what does that mean? If they haven't gotten feedback in three months, I would say they should ask for a meeting. Or in one of their weekly or bi-weekly meetings just say, "I'd like to set aside 10 minutes to just talk about me and my career," and be open to it. And, when they actually get feedback that's powerful, not to be defensive, but to ask, "Can you tell me more or help me better understand this?"

Molly Shepard:

"Or when have you seen this, because I really do want to work on correcting that if it's negative." If it's positive, "How can I continue to do that, and what would you like to see more of?" etc. The manager has to present it as well in a way that doesn't create defensiveness. And, I've often thought that in a review, if you start with the positives, if you start with acknowledgements of what's going well and really build somebody up, they're going to be more receptive too. And, there are just a few things I'd like to suggest going forward. But to start out with, "I've looked at your work, I've looked at your hours and here's

where I think you're deficient," and just starting off that, it just it's devastating and people can't hear it as well. So, always start a review meeting with the positive, and we could talk more about that, but that would be one piece of advice I would give manager.

Emilie Ninan:

That's good advice to start with the positive. But when you say to someone, "Here are some suggestions?" Is that direct enough? In my experience, people tend to hear what they want to hear. And, that's led me to think a lot about this notion of Radical Candor that Kim Scott talks about in her book, being direct while still compassionate and caring for what's best for the other person, but not softening the message so much that it's lost.

Molly Shepard:

Well, and it is hard to give feedback when you think somebody might get hurt, especially if they're really kind of doing well and you don't want to inhibit them in any way, or make them feel badly. That's why the 360 that you mentioned is in fact, such a wonderful tool. Because, it allows a coach... And, this is something law firms could do. It allows a coach to do a 360 on an individual and talk to six or eight colleagues that know this person, see this person at work and can comment in a confidential way where their comments are anonymous when they're reported back. So as you remember, we would take the eight 360 interviews and integrate them into an anonymous report under themes, so that we could give the feedback back to the individual.

Molly Shepard:

And, he or she would not know where it was coming from and who said it. And, we don't even encourage that they try even guess who said it. But, they listen to the themes and what's really being said on the positive side, as well as on the developmental side. And, it takes the onus off of management to give that really critical feedback. And, a 360 report can be pretty strong, [crosstalk 00:23:48] maybe you might remember, pretty direct. But, it helps set the stage. And then, if it's all out in the open, then the individual can talk about that more openly with a manager. I got the feedback, these are the things that are seen as what I'm doing very well right now, but I also am looking at some areas where I can get stronger and I'd love your help on that. So, it's that two-way street again.

Emilie Ninan:

Yeah, no, I found that really helpful. It was hard to hear initially, especially when you've not had as candid reviews in the past, but it was so helpful.

Molly Shepard:

If any.

Emilie Ninan:

Right. But, it was so helpful to have that information because you can't address things if you don't know about them, or how people are perceiving them. And, that is one thing I did keep from that learning as I've asked our internal... We have a client interviewer and I've asked her to do 360 reviews for me once I became department chair. And, it's just so useful to have, I think, that third party do that [crosstalk 00:24:54] to solicit [crosstalk 00:24:55].



Molly Shepard:

Oh, yes. And, you can find out how you really are viewed by your people, and what you could be doing more of and even better. And, what a wonderful tool for you.

Emilie Ninan:

Yeah, no, that's worked wonderfully. I want to turn to your book now or one of them. I understand you're updating, *Breaking Into the Boys' Club*, *The Complete Guide for Women to Get Ahead in Business*. If at all, how women's issues in the workplace changed since the book was first published?

Molly Shepard:

Yeah, I have it right in front of me as I'm editing it, *breaking into the* [crosstalk 00:00:25:27]. Unfortunately, although I'm updating the statistics that are in there, they have not changed as much as I would have liked to have seen when I first published this book five years ago. And then edited it, re-edited it three years ago. So, we're now refreshing it. And, the statistics are not moving in the direction that I would like to see. So although, I remain positive every day that we're at a tipping point and these statistics will improve. They haven't, as much as I would like. So, what has really changed most, is what the pandemic has caused. And, that has taken women out of these scenarios where they can develop personal relationships, and see people of influence in one-on-one meetings and put them on a virtual platform. And, it has made it more difficult in some ways, and easier in some ways.

Molly Shepard:

So, when you're in a virtual meeting, everybody's kind of all the same. And, I used to encourage women in in-person meetings to make sure they got the right seat at the table. And, they were seated maybe across from the decision-makers, so there was eye contact and not on the side. And, that they spoke up often and early, and so on. Now in a virtual meeting, it's a little harder. It's a little easier, because you're all the same, and it's [crosstalk 00:26:56] a little harder to get heard. So, it's put more of a stress on that. And, there are the other issues around balance, and what's been going on in terms of what women are covering, not just professionally in these very unsettling times. But, when we all come through it, hopefully, and within the next year, I think virtual work will be here to stay.

Molly Shepard:

So, we do have to pay attention to how we come across virtually, as well as how we develop our relationships in-person, and get to know people that way. Otherwise, this issues remain the same Emilie, is women need to communicate more effectively on all fronts. They need to be more concise. They need to be more confident. They need to be more effective in how they present their ideas. They need to get their voices a little bit louder, so that they're heard. They need to speak up a little bit earlier in meetings, so they set leadership tone for themselves. They need to look at their impact and presence in other ways, because it's all a matter of how you appear, your visual, your vocal. It's kind of a composite of all those things. They need to be more politically savvy in their organization that brings us back to stakeholder analysis.

Molly Shepard:

They need to also be thinking about where they want to go and making sure that people know, what their aspirations are? And, not just take that for granted. The fact that you're doing A plus work is not necessarily going to get you to the next step. It's really those relationships, it will be actually more



important. And, that's pretty much the same. But, we will be addressing resiliency which is critical. We'll be addressing much more deeply sponsorship, which is critical and enhancing the book throughout. But, the issues for both men and women remain somewhat the same.

Emilie Ninan:

Right. Well, I'm looking forward to the new edition. When are you expecting that to come out in 2021?

Molly Shepard:

2021. Well, they want everything shortly. So, I imagine they're going to do it in the first quarter of 2021.

Emilie Ninan:

Okay. So you and Peter wrote another book, I guess it was in 2017 called, *The Bully-Proof Workplace, Essential Strategies, Tips, and Scripts for Dealing with the Office Sociopath*. And in it, you described four types of bullies with one thing in common, a desperate need for control based on deep seated fear and insecurity. Can you give us an example of a bully at work and a couple of tips on how to manage interactions with such a person?

Molly Shepard:

Well, we're all familiar with the brute, right. The brute is that loud person who yells, screams, decimates you, is just terribly aggressive in their criticisms both publicly and in-person. And so, that's how people mostly think about bullies. But, we wrote the book because there was no book on bullying in the workplace. There was lots of books coming out on bullying in schools and with children, but nothing in the workplace. So, we saw an opportunity there. We deal with so many bullies in our coaching that we thought it was important that we wrote the book. And so, I began to reflect on how I was treated in the course of my career. And, I ran into several bullies. And in a way, I want to thank them, because they made me stronger and brought me pretty much to this point.

Molly Shepard:

But, one of the bullies was a woman who spread rumors about me behind my back. I did not know she was doing this and she did it for months. She was jealous of my involvement in the firm and my level, which was... I was one of the few vice presidents in the organization who was female. So for whatever reason, she spread some very nasty lies about me. And when I heard about it, I was absolutely shocked. Shocked that A, that these were being spread and I didn't know. And B, that it was coming from another woman. And, she could have really damaged my career. She certainly probably did damage people's opinions of me.

Molly Shepard:

I don't even want to really go back there, but I call her the [blier 00:31:45]. I call her the blier brute, who behind the scenes pulls you down. And, I'm sure a lot of us have experienced that. So then, we went on to talk about the braggart, the bully who's always taking the air time and bragging about himself or herself, and never letting anybody say anything, contribute. It's all about him or her, and his or her ideas, and that's bullying and so on. So, we categorize these bullies, we talk about who they are, what they do and how to deal with them. We'll give strategies and tips on actually how to confront them in the moment. It's a very valuable book, especially [crosstalk 00:32:31] in these times.

Emilie Ninan:

Well, I also saw earlier this week, I guess, on social media that Peter has a new book, on cultivating leaders and how men and women can use the power of the brain to effectively lead together, which immediately struck my interest. Because of course, that's what we have daily in the law firm environment.

Molly Shepard:

Well, that's cultivating leaders that takes these relationships between men and women even to a deeper level, because it does deal with the neuroscience of emotions. And, what happens when the differences, and styles, and behaviors comes to fruition in a meeting or in a discussion and how to deal with them. So, it's a very, very valuable book. Do buy it.

Emilie Ninan:

[crosstalk 00:33:20] forward to it. Yeah. So in the interest of time, I'm going to wrap up with this one last question, Molly. Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give your younger self?

Molly Shepard:

Oh boy, that's such a big one. And, what held me back Emilie, throughout my career until I got to of a certain age and a certain point was my lack of confidence in myself.

Molly Shepard:

And, I think that confidence pulls certainly women down more than almost any other thing. So, what I would have told my former self is stop second guessing yourself, questioning yourself, wondering whether you really belong in the room, really belong in that leadership position, and start looking instead at what you've achieved and why you do deserve to be there. And look at your accomplishments, and really congratulate yourself, and get rid of that negative little thing on your shoulder that is taking you down and making you second guess who you are. So, the issue of confidence, which we deal quite a bit with at The Leader's Edge, as well as in our coaching is critical.

Molly Shepard:

And, I would have worked more on that. I would have gotten help sooner, and I would've worked more on that.

Emilie Ninan:

Well you present yourself so confidently now, and you've taught many of us how to be more confident. So thank you, Molly.

Molly Shepard:

Ah, well thank you.

Emilie Ninan:

And Molly Shepard, CEO of Leader's Edge. Thank you again for joining me.

Molly Shepard:

This transcript was exported on Dec 07, 2020 - view latest version [here](#).

Thank you Emilie for having me.

John Wright:

Thanks again to Emilie Ninan and Molly Shepard. Make sure to visit our website, [www.ballardspahr.com](http://www.ballardspahr.com), where you can find the latest news and guidance from our attorneys. Subscribe to the show in Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Spotify or your favorite podcast platform. If you have any questions or suggestions for the show, please email [podcast@ballardspahr.com](mailto:podcast@ballardspahr.com). Stay tuned for a new episode coming soon. Thank you for listening.