

EPISODE 129

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:03.0] ANNOUNCER: Welcome to the Mentor List.

[0:00:05.0] “To turn you into the best version of you that’s around.”

[0:00:08.4] “To seek support and you need to allow yourself to be supported.”

[0:00:12.0] “Really have a point of difference.”

[0:00:14.3] “What is precious, what’s really important and then putting some boundaries there.”

[0:00:18.7] ANNOUNCER: The Mentor List specializes in interviews with top business minds, gather their advice for your career. This is The Mentor List.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:31.3] RICHARD: Welcome, thank you very much Tanya Singh for joining us on this interview for diversity matters lives in conversation. Welcome.

[0:00:42.1] TS: Thanks Richard, thanks for having me. I’m so pleased to be here.

[0:00:46.1] RICHARD: No problem at all. Tanya is the global head of Remuneration & Benefits for Global Powerhouse Computershare and she’s been in that role for how long?

[0:00:57.6] TS: Well, it’s just over six months now.

[0:00:59.4] RICHARD: Just over six months now, how’s it all going, alright?

[0:01:02.1] TS: Going really well. It’s a wonderful organization.

[0:01:04.4] RICHARD: Fantastic. Well, why don't you kick off and tell us a little bit about you and your childhood and where you were born and everything else that would be really interesting.

[0:01:15.4] TS: Sure. I was born in India, I grew up there. I come from an extremely middle-class background. My mother was a teacher and my father was in the Indian Armed Forces. I am the third daughter in a family of three girls. It was made very clear to me by those around me very early on that for me, being a girl was a great disappointment. I pretty much failed at birth by being born the wrong gender.

At a very young age, I had to get comfortable with the fact that I was a girl in a world that wanted essentially, wanted me to be a boy. No matter what I did or achieved, it was never going to be enough because of that.

[0:02:02.6] RICHARD: My goodness, okay.

[0:02:05.6] TS: It is fairly heavy stuff. My parents died when I was 13 and my father had a huge influence over me. He was my biggest advocate and his lesson to me always was that I need to study hard, I need to get education and I need to make something of myself. Their death at such a young age for me, you can't survive that without coming out of it being a lot more resilient and independent than most people.

[0:02:33.0] RICHARD: Absolutely. What happened next?

[0:02:38.5] TS: After my parent's death, my sister who was 23 years old then, stepped in to look after me and I'm so grateful because she brought to my life a very calming, very patient energy and when I look back to when I was 23, goodness, you know, and my maturity level, kudos to her, raising a teenager of very little support and I think she did an amazing job and I think it needs to be called out that actually, you know, I do have older two older sisters and both of them are extremely strong women.

They're very successful in their own right. My oldest sister is a sleep doctor to athletes in US. She travels the world talking about the importance of sleep and my middle sister who is the one who raised me, she has her own composting business and she's routinely in the news and she wins awards for sustainability and so I have been quite lucky that even though I had the

circumstances of being a girl and an unwanted daughter at that, I did have two very strong women that I have looked up to all my life.

[0:03:42.9] RICHARD: Fantastic but there was a moment when you decided that you wanted to go and leave India. Do you want to tell us about that? It was after school, wasn't it?

[0:03:54.0] TS: It was, yes. It was in 2000, I was 18 years old. I had always wanted to study abroad. We had some family in New Zealand so it seemed like a good choice and due to circumstances, I actually ended up after a while, being on my own. Wow, that was some culture shock to me. You know, New Zealand was as far removed from my understanding of the world as you can imagine, having grown up in India and the fact that I learned to be independent and resilient at such a young age really helped carry through a very difficult period for me where I had to study, I had to work, I had to make ends meet.

When I moved to New Zealand, I actually really wanted to do a law degree but there was this pressure from back home that I needed to do something IT related because it was the next big thing and that is a very typical thing coming from an Indian background and I caved in and did a degree in computer science but knew immediately that there was no way I would work in that field.

I fell into HR by accident and then I did go on to have an education in HR as well and in 2011, I moved to Australia. I've always known that Australia was end game. From a distance in New Zealand, I know this was the country for me, it is a land of opportunity and I think the minute I landed, I felt that I was home.

[0:05:17.9] RICHARD: Fantastic. Talking about those early years. Your sister is obviously a fantastic mentor for you, your 23-year-old sister. Can you maybe sort of talk about, are there any non-family members that have been of particular significance for you as a potential mentor and have shaped who you are today?

[0:05:40.2] TS: Yes, I think that I have two mentors that I think are worth calling out. One is a lady called Janet Eisen who I met first in New Zealand. When I met her, I was in very early stages of my career and Janet was actually semi-retired and she had this lifetime's experience in Reward. She was this no nonsense, straight talking, confident, strong woman, she would speak her mind and give advice and this rocking subject matter expert.

I knew instantly that that's what I wanted to be. In New Zealand back then, you know, the reason for me picking her as a mentor was, there were very few role models, especially female role models and those who looked or sounded like me. I think subliminally, until then, I was never able to visualize what a career or a long-term goal could look like.

The second mentor for me is this gentleman called Michael Roomy. Micheal was the person who hired me into Telstra when I first moved in Australia. I think he was my first manager, who made me feel that my background and my ethnicity and me being a female does not hold me back.

He was so extremely confident in my skills and he believed in me so openly that seeing his belief in me really supercharged my own confidence. Working with him, I realized that I can set myself goals and achieve things that I probably haven't thought of before then and I have carried that through as a leader now with myself ever since. Because I do believe that when you have people reporting to you as a leader, if you support them and believe in them openly, they perform so much better and their own confidence grows exponentially too.

[0:07:29.4] RICHARD: Absolutely. Well, they sound like both fantastic mentors, really, really good. It's great to have people that believe in you early. Have you been a mentor yourself now and what do you get out of that?

[0:07:42.9] TS: Yes, I have been a mentor myself over the last few years and I do try and pass on what I have learned. For me, it's pay it forward, of sorts. The two people that I can think of, I know, when they met me, felt very similar to me. They were from non-Anglo-Saxon background and one of them was a female and over time, they've come to realize that they can be successful in their own right and that they need to not change themselves too much to fit in and there are some excellent sources out there like the culturally diverse women that Michelle Redfern and Div Pillay have spearheaded.

There are lots of networking and learning resources out there that are really suited to them to develop and grow. I find that passing that on has really helped me mentally feel like I'm giving back in a way.

[0:08:40.2] RICHARD: Very good. Give us then a little bit of an overview of your career to date and how that has developed?

[0:08:50.7] TS: I started with Mercer. Like I said, I fell into HR accidentally. I started as a consultant and moved on to then manage the reward function for Beca in New Zealand. Beca is a large engineering firm by New Zealand standards. I then moved to Australia with Telstra and after that, I managed the reward function at Nufarm, which is another large ASX listed company with lots of global presence. Now I, as you mentioned, head of the reward function for Computershare and I'm also a board member of a local large not for profit.

The organization does excellent work for the community through education services, child care services, emergency relief and crisis intervention. When I first started my career, I thought that if I worked really hard, if I brought strong integrity and ethics to my role, then good things will follow. It didn't take me too long to realize that that is not how the world works and I think what I was not prepared for is that people around me would view me not just for the work I do but also for who I am and I've had to face the reality of that and work through those circumstances from probably the start in my career.

[0:10:12.4] RICHARD: Which brings me nicely to my next sort of question, which is all around diversity and inclusion. Have you got a diversity or inclusion story that affected you that might resonate with our audience?

[0:10:25.7] TS: There are so many, Richard. I'm going to talk to you about two stories actually because I think they both speak to the same issue. In New Zealand, I was at a conference and I was seated next to this really senior gentleman in HR. We got talking and I asked him to give me some tips to help me further my career and he basically said to me, "It doesn't matter what advice I give you. You are an Indian and therefore, you can never go too far in your career."

I was quite naïve back then and I responded, saying "No, no, I'm a Kiwi" which was my way of saying that I am a citizen and I belong. He was quite emphatic and he turned around and said, "No, you don't understand, you will always be an Indian" and we sort of ended the conversation there. Then, in Australia, as recently as three years ago, I was speaking to this partner in one of the big four consultancies here, that business has a large role of consulting practice and I asked the lady, "I want to take the next step in my career, I'm wondering if consulting is something I should get back into" and she told me point blank that I could never be successful in consulting because –

I sort of quote her here, "Members of the board in an Australian business would never want to hear from someone who is not a middle-aged white man." The interesting thing is, I don't think

she meant any offense by it. She truly believed that and I think she thought that she was just being honest with me. Here's the funny thing, right? When I sought that advice from her, I was already at that point, for a few years now, advising the board in the roles that I was in.

[0:12:11.2] RICHARD: That's amazing, isn't it?

[0:12:12.8] TS: Right. I think it's really interesting, Richard because, both these people felt that they can say these things and it was perfectly acceptable to do so. I think it really was their view of the world and for me, those moments are so vivid. I can actually recall as I'm talking to you, where I was sitting when those conversations were held, what their faces looked like and I remember that I felt so angry. I felt so disappointed and so frustrated at a fundamental level. I was being told that you're not good enough, simply because of who you are and that is a really damaging sentiment to hear.

For me especially, because I've given you some background about where I was born and I had heard of variations of that in my childhood. After each of those two incidents, I remember once I had gotten over the initial devastation, I felt so much more driven. I felt so charged up, I felt so much more determined to succeed. Giving up was just never an option for me. I guess I am here speaking to you today, you know, having achieved some of the milestones that I had set up for myself.

I guess to that partner who said to me that boards wouldn't want to hear advice from me because of my background, I'd like to say that in my day job, I do give advice to the board and I have actually gone and done one better because I am a member of the board myself.

[0:13:39.9] RICHARD: Very good, excellent. What a fantastic story, absolutely. If you could go back to your 21-year-old self just finished university and you could give young Tanya some advice now, what advice would you give her?

[0:14:01.5] TS: I'm going to give you a somewhat controversial answer. I subscribe to the philosophy that the biggest failure in life is having too much regret and just to take it from me, I had known better because the reality is whatever happened has happened and I cannot change it. What I can do is to choose to work through the circumstances that this life has handed me and I guess make the best of it. It has taken me a while to realize this Richard and I think you know, it's really important to verbalize it.

I am going to say it, which is that I do not apologize for who I am. I am the sum of my experiences and I strongly believe that organizations should hire people like me, not despite that but because of that. I have two young children, I face all the challenges that working parents do. We live in a society where we expect mothers to work like they don't have a family and to parent like they don't work. I happen to believe that having children has made me so much more confident and more productive.

I think the advice I would give is not to myself but to organizations out there and the advice is this: You cannot claim to support diversity without creating an environment in your organization that allows people from diverse backgrounds to succeed. If as an organization, if you do not have diversity in your leadership, ask yourself what systems and environment have you set up whether it be deliberately or inadvertently, that is stopping the employees in your organization from diverse backgrounds from either applying for those leadership roles or being successful in them.

[0:15:50.2] RICHARD: Absolutely. Is there a quote that you live by that helps center you if you've got a problem?

[0:15:58.7] TS: I'm an avid reader, I actually read a book a week and I do that because I've gotten a fantastic app, Audible, and I love to listen to the book when I am doing chores around the house or if I go for a walk. It was really hard for me to restrain myself to one quote but there is one from Brene Brown that I think is specifically – it is really applicable here. It is a little long so you'll have to bear with me as I read it out loud, I have written it down.

It says this: True belonging is the practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic selves with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone. True belonging only happens when we present our authentic imperfect selves to the world. True belonging does not require that we change who we are, it requires that we be who we are. Our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.

[0:17:03.3] RICHARD: Excellent, probably the longest quote that we've ever had on the First Two Matters but it is truly thought-provoking. Tanya, thank you very much for sharing it.

[0:17:15.3] TS: I think it is an important message, you know? Because when you come from a diverse background and you are struggling to be heard and seen, there is so much out there

that tells you that you need to fit in and change yourselves and mold and I think some of that is valuable but a lot of it is also, it can take you away from being authentic.

[0:17:34.4] RICHARD: Absolutely. Now, you read a book a week, I mean, I just don't know where you get the time to read a book a week. You listen to it but you had to sort of pick one or two books that really you just go back to really speak to who you are and that have changed you, what would that be?

[0:17:53.4] TS: I think the one that I like to recommend is the book called *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*. It is by a fellow called Nathaniel Branden and what he does is he speaks about the importance of self-esteem as a cornerstone to your professional and personal achievement and the six pillars I think is, from memory there, living consciously, living purposefully, self-acceptance, self-responsibility, self-assertiveness and personal integrity.

What this book does is it kind of makes you feel that you are more in charge of your career choices and it talks to the psychology of success as an inside job and you really need to work on yourself inside out to define what that success looks like and how you're going to get there.

[0:18:44.0] RICHARD: Very good, excellent. Well Tanya, it's been fantastic to have you on First Two Matters, leaders in conversation. Really, really great and fantastic interview, so thank you very much for joining me.

[0:18:57.9] TS: Thanks Richard, thanks for having me and I think you are changing the world one podcast at a time.

[0:19:03.1] RICHARD: Well, I'm trying to. Thank you Tanya.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:19:07.9] RICHARD: Thank you for joining us today at The Mentor List. If you'd like to hear more or speak to us about recommending our next interview guest, come on through to mentorlist.com.au. You can also find out more about our suite of mastermind series taking shape in your area, your industry and your discipline. We look forward to welcoming you to one of our events very soon. Stay tuned for another great show.

[OUTRO]

[0:19:36.8] ANNOUNCER: Thank you for listening to The Mentor List. If you like what you're hearing on The Mentor List, the best way to support the show is to just take a few seconds to leave a rating and/or comment over on iTunes. You can also find further information about this show and links to further episodes at mentorlist.com.au. Until next time, this is The Mentor List.

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