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Leadership coach Holly Burton: ‘Part of the work that I do is around having [clients] own the thing that they want’

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Holly Burton, a leadership coach for women in male-dominated industries, poses for a portrait in Vancouver on Aug. 5, 2020.

JACKIE DIVES/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Holly Burton is a leadership coach for women in male-dominated industries. Born in Vancouver, Ms. Burton got her start as a mining engineer and business analyst before striking out on her own. She works with women on traditional leadership challenges, such as decision-making, delegation and professional development, and also addresses the unique issues faced by women in male-dominated fields – idea-stealing, higher performance standards and more. Ms. Burton is also a consultant for companies aiming to attract and retain diverse applicants.

What sparked your interest in mining?

In first-year engineering, they make you take this course where you have to see all the different departments you could go into as an engineer. When mining engineering came in and gave a presentation, initially I scoffed – who wants to dig holes for the rest of their lives, right? By the end of the presentation, I was just blown away by the scale of things that happen in mining. It’s a type of engineering where you have to be so multidisciplinary, compared to other fields.

When did you start to realize it wasn’t working out and begin to consider coaching?

Part of why I started the coaching business is because there's a type of work in coaching that I really wanted to do. The other part of it is that I had a career that I really loved that I just couldn't turn into something as successful or advanced or complex as I wanted. I wanted a career that was more people-focused, and to have that in engineering is tough. In most professions, your job as a manager is to manage people, and in engineering, there's 10-plus years of technical depth that you need before you get to do any of the juicy people management that I really love. My intention once I started training to be a coach wasn't to make that a full-time business for probably another five to 10 years. But that got sped up really quickly by me consistently hitting my head against the glass ceiling and getting so tired of watching that happen to myself and all my female colleagues.

What do you want your clients to take away from their time with you?

One thing that happens a lot is clients come to me with dreams they obviously don't care about. The dream they have is a way for them to get to something else, or a thing they think they're allowed to have, not actually the thing that they want. Part of the work that I do is around having them own the thing that they want. If you don't, you can spend a lot of time toiling away on things that don't matter to you. The good thing about that is you never have your heart crushed if the thing you want doesn't work out – but you also never get to go do the thing you really want. I see that all the time with my clients. It's a really reasonable reaction to a world where those dreams are often dashed.

You say your coaching comes from a feminist lens – what does that mean?

A lot of women get feedback in their career and say, "I have to change myself, I have to fix that." If you realize the system is designed so that sometimes you don't win and that there's actually no way for you to pretzel yourself into the right shape to change the outcome, suddenly now it's not you that's problem. You can concentrate your energy on things that will create an impact. Sometimes it's important to pick up and fight again, and sometimes it's important to say, I'm just going to lose this. That is so hard, and be sad about it because it's still crushing. But it's not because you're broken, it's because the system's broken. A lot of a lot of leadership coaching that doesn't come from a feminist lens misses that, and that can be really damaging.

Is there something you wish you'd known about changing careers before you did it?

Thank god I knew as little as I did. If I had known the amount of effort and money it would take, I don't think I would have done it because I would have been too scared. I'm still happy with the choice now. Before, in order to feel I could move forward and be confident, I felt like I had to know the answers. Now what I'm realizing is, I don't need to know that I've solved this problem before, I just know that for the last four years I've been able to solve every new problem that showed up. It's about my ability to learn and adapt despite not knowing everything.

What was something you've learned in your career that's served you well?

One of the most important things that I figured out was how to talk the language of business – how to take a proposal I had for what I was hoping to implement at work, and turn that into a dollars-and-cents opportunity for the company. Turn that into a way that the company would increase revenue, reduce costs, reduce risk, or improve its reputation. If you can do those things, your ideas get more traction and people start to see you in a different way. You go from being a cog that produces work, to being a person that produces opportunity.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

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