

Agency for Change Podcast: Uma Gopaldass, Founder, Leading Lotus LLC

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Uma Gopaldass

Lead from beyond the mud and seek truth and clarity in your decisions.

Announcer:

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

Lyn Wineman:

Today's guest has a career that has truly taken her everywhere, from offshore oil rigs and underground minds, to boardrooms and classrooms, but her latest venture started when she decided to turn her years of experience in developing successful operations and people strategies into a company that mentors and advises business leaders in making better decisions by helping them expose the biases that can lead to poor choices. Hi, everyone. This is Lyn Wineman, president and chief strategist at KidGlov and you're listening to the Agency for Change podcast. We're talking with Uma Devi Gopaldass today, founder of Leading Lotus, which advises businesses in helping them drive precision in governance, critical decisions, and due diligence. Uma, welcome to the podcast.

Uma Gopaldass:

Oh, I'm so excited. Thank you for having me.

Lyn Wineman:

I'm so excited to talk to you too. Every time I talk to you, I get inspired and learn more things, and I want to start with talking about Leading Lotus. I've heard you describe what it does as helping a company find its soul, which sounds so amazing. Could you tell our listeners though a little bit more about what the organization does?

Uma Gopaldass:

Absolutely, the whole organization, Leading Lotus, has a very large component of governance, doing the right thing.

Lyn Wineman:

Okay.

Uma Gopaldass:

And for businesses, doing the right thing can mean a couple of things. First of all, it's always going to be, we got to make money, we got to be profitable.

Lyn Wineman:

Right.

Uma Gopaldass:

We got to hit performance, we got to, we got to, we got, got. There's a huge component that normally gets sidetracked, which is the impact, the value you bring to your customers, the society, your stakeholders, and everyone who believes in your company.

Lyn Wineman:

Right.

Uma Gopaldass:

And so, that component becomes more of a tick in the box than the main goal for quite a number of businesses, unless you're a social impact company. So having said that, my energy is spent helping these businesses to reframe the way they go about running their businesses to reach that value, so you can make money. The money comes as a secondary thing, and the only way you can do that is really finding the soul and heart of the business. So big companies, it's always easier for them to do that branding based on social impact and corporate responsibility, but are they really living up to it?

Lyn Wineman:

I think you're right, Uma. As I think back to the history of KidGlov, I feel like the point where we found our soul, when we said that our purpose is going to be helping the people who change the world, that's when things took off for us, and it wasn't just the emotional side of the business that took off, the profitable side of the business took off too when we found that soul. So, I love that you said that. So, I am going to ask you more about Leading Lotus, but before we talk shop, I want to hear a bit more about you. I heard you're a dancer and I'm curious, when did you become interested in dance and do you still make time for it now that you are the founder of a successful company?

Uma Gopaldass:

I was heavily in love with dancing since the day I was born.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh my.

Uma Gopaldass:

My parents have pictures of me just dancing, not wanting to hold their hand, I'd be dancing in the streets. I'd be like two years old and they're like, "Oh my God, we have a crazy child." So I've always loved dancing to music. It comes naturally, and then it didn't help my parents and my auntie, she had a dance studio and she was a professional, classical Indian dancing, Bharatanatyam, which is ancient, and so she forced all the nieces and nephews into getting formally trained and it's a high disciplined dance form. And then my parents were like, "Okay, dancing's not going to pay your bills." As I grew up, they pulled me out of dancing and said, "You're going to just go through school and become the best you can be," which

I was heartbroken when they did that, but I continued having my own dance group in school, so dance programs and groups.

Uma Gopaldass:

And in university, I remember performing for businesses during their dinner and dances. So, I would sign up, and I choreographed, and I started choreographing. Today, I'm 48. We are talking about 20 years old to now, I still dance instead of doing exercise and all that. I love dancing, so I use that as my dance form and exercise form. I do a lot of African dance forms. I'm learning more different dancing styles. That's just to help my own neurological performance. Dancing is a really good way to keep your brains going.

Lyn Wineman:

I like that. It helps your body and your brain. I think it also brings so much joy and I think that's good for us too, Uma.

Uma Gopaldass:

Absolutely.

Lyn Wineman:

So, I loved hearing about the dance. Let's talk a bit about your career path. So, how did you go from working in the gas and oil mining industry to where you are today? And I'd also love to know, what did you learn from those previous roles that you were able to work into Leading Lotus?

Uma Gopaldass:

Absolutely, it's funny that... I always tell people that my career wasn't by choice, it was by accident, all of it. I joined oil and gas when I was 16, I was interning. A friend's mom was working for a huge oil and gas company in Singapore, and they called a couple of the kids up to go do filing, and it was \$50 a day back in the days in 1990s, early '90s. So, I was like the richest kid in school coming from a poor background. So, I just got hooked. I got hooked on, who's this industry that has this kind of top money to pay for kids? And, so I just went into it head first, dove into it, and went through college, university, and they extended a scholarship. And so I said yes, but the scholarship came with having to move to Indonesia as soon as I graduate from Singapore's university.

Uma Gopaldass:

And, I took my first overseas job posted in Indonesia, deep down in the jungles drilling oil on oil-

Lyn Wineman:

Oh my goodness.

Uma Gopaldass:

I was only 21 and I'd been going back and forth to before when I was doing internship, I would still go to offshore as an intern, but to do it full time and being that young and living in a remote world was fantastic. And so, that put me up to 16 years in oil and gas. They really took care of you. They grew minds within the company, talent because there was such brain drain back in the 80s. The oil and gas industry learned to keep the people at top of their mind and they didn't spend money on people. So, I left that

and then having done that 16 years, the only drawback with oil and gas was I have a friend in oil and gas who calls herself 30 countries before the age of 30.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow.

Uma Gopaldass:

I moved a lot. You don't own furniture. I learned that way. You don't try to have relationships that you have to break, and so it was just easier to have very little baggage, let's put it that way. And, then after 16 years you get tired of it and decide, I need to find a bit more meaning in life, and then I went into consulting for one of the four big CS, Accenture, and somehow ended up doing big company transformation, so reorganizations, mergers, acquisitions, and while I was with Accenture I met my future company.

Uma Gopaldass:

I've always thought I needed to go back into industry before I retire, or start my own company. Around this time, I knew that I was always built to be my own boss and start my own company. I just didn't know when. This was the early 2000s, and I was doing this work for Accenture for a gold mining company, which was from black gold, drilling oil, to gold-gold, which was fantastic, and I did a project for them in a small town in Elko, Nevada. So, imagine me flying from Singapore all the way to Elko, Nevada.

Lyn Wineman:

There's a little bit of a culture shock there.

Uma Gopaldass:

I called it the boonies, living in the boonies. I loved living in the boonies. I did that all my life in oil and gas and I fell in love in Elko and decided, you know what, I want to move there permanently.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow.

Uma Gopaldass:

So, six months later, New Mining, which is my company I was working for, offered me a full-time role in Nevada. I moved there, and then three years later they moved me to their headquarters in Colorado, so overall 30 years of just accidentally moving around and building my career, and that's how I ended up to seven years of doing that. I just decided it was time. It was time for me to be on my own.

Lyn Wineman:

So I'm curious, what did you learn from those roles in mining? And I love the way you put it, mining black gold and then mining gold-gold, and then doing the consulting, which was in the middle. What did you take away from those that you're able to put to work in Leading Lotus now?

Uma Gopaldass:

Oh my God, there's so much. With Accenture, it's strategy for the clients, it's strategy. So, let's say it's nice paperwork of where things should beautifully fall into place if everything went well and according to

plan, and then you have the world of mining oil and gas, which is unpredictable because you're talking about working with the land, working with human beings, working in a community that owns lands, Indigenous tribes. So no, there is no such thing as everything going according to plan. You can be 100% sure that nothing will go according to plan.

Uma Gopaldass:

How do you make those things move together and still hold the soul of the company together? And decision making at the top, filtered down all the way to the bottom, how can they be more aligned, and people follow with you versus against all different parts? People are pushing and pulling, mid-management, working folks, all sorts of layers, and board of directors involved in it, shareholders involved in it, community regulation. It's a huge deal, it's not easy. So, that's what I learned was from a governance perspective, from a risk perspective, it's not easy, but it can be done if people just sit down and look at the value, look at the humanity within the business, look at the business personality and characteristics, so that's what I learned.

Lyn Wineman:

I love that you said that. At KidGlov when we do branding, we also like to do a deep dive into the person because companies do have personalities. They have very distinct personalities and that's what makes them an interesting place to work, and it does tap into their soul as well. So, I'd like to though ask you one more question about mining, because when we were preparing for this interview, we stumbled across another interview that you did where you discussed a nickname that you had when you were in the oil industry. Would you tell us what that was and how you got that nickname?

Uma Gopaldass:

Yeah, there was two, but I think I only spoke about one. One is Dynamite and the other one was Baby Shoes.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh my goodness.

Uma Gopaldass:

And, then they were combined in Dynamite in Baby Shoes. These were big oil rigging folks. We are talking about a predominantly male environment, captains of supply vessels, oil drilling, rig managers, directors, all those sorts of folks would call me Dynamite, Baby Shoes, Dynamite in Baby Shoes, and it was always a term of endearment. It was nothing bad or they were not trying to pick something demeaning to me. If you want to know the meaning, supposing everyone would like to know, it's basically-

Lyn Wineman:

I think so.

Uma Gopaldass:

Basically, I was this 5'2", three on a good day and I was young, I was 21. I remember I was a managing director and a management advisor and technical advisor for the entire Indonesia.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow.

Uma Gopaldass:

Yes, working with customs, director general, ministers in Indonesia, as well as the clients who are CEOs sometimes and top-notch VPs and directors of... We're talking about Shell, BP, BHP, all these big companies, and I could hold a conversation with them and not be influenced into their way of thinking. My rhetoric was always... It was not rapid, but it was influential, which made them think of me as a dynamite in a small package. The Baby Shoes came in the fact that my safety boots... I had to custom all the safety boots, the Red Wings boots, I remember, the brand Red Wings, steel boots because the normal ones would never fit me. The normal ones that were in the store and in the supplies, there wasn't anything that was my size, so Baby Shoes was the nickname.

Lyn Wineman:

I love it. Having met you a couple of times now, I can see both of those. Particularly, I can see the Dynamite because you've just got this, I like to call it fire in the belly. You've just got this fire and this passion about you, and I could see where that would really come out. So, let's talk a bit more about Leading Lotus, and I've mentioned I love branding and everybody that listens to the podcast knows that I love branding. How did you come up with your name Leading Lotus, and why did you choose a lotus to represent the company?

Uma Gopaldass:

I'm telling you, I spent a lot of money the first three months of starting my company in trying to find a name. And, then one day I was sitting down to read something. My friend had given me this book about white lotus because she saw a statue in my house of a lotus plant. And she thought, oh, I'd love this book. So, she bought White Lotus, which is basically something about Buddha's teachings, and I took the book and I started reading it, and I kept looking at the lotus figure, and I kept looking at the statue that I had in the house and I was like, "Wait a minute."

Uma Gopaldass:

One of the Hindu gods in my background is Saraswati, goddess Saraswati and she sits on a white lotus, and she symbolizes the goddess of wisdom, pure knowledge, and truth against biasness, so you have to speak truth by proving yourself wrong and knowledge through meditation and culture and the arts and love for just education. And so I was thinking, "Wow, that's what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to build people to have the purity of thought in decision making for businesses, so I should call it Lotus." Now, wait a minute. Now you have Lotus, what else do I call it? You can't just have a spa looking name on your company. So, then I sat down and I thought, "Maybe it has to have a word of leadership or executive or strategy," and then the word came, Lotus Leads, but apparently Lotus Leads was taken, and so Leading Lotus was born. So, lead from beyond the mud.

Lyn Wineman:

I love that.

Uma Gopaldass:

So, that's how I was born.

Lyn Wineman:

That is great. The best brands have great stories behind them, and that is a great story. So Uma, I'm interested in the process that you use to help businesses with their strategy and their decision making. What does that look like and how would a company typically engage Leading Lotus for help?

Uma Gopaldass:

Yes, so today I'm involved in a lot of governance work, and when you say governance, it's a lot of bias breaking, breaking the biases within the decision making. It can start from the styles of the leadership who are making this decision, or it could start from a strategy itself to see if there's any inbuilt biases within that, and what I mean by that is if you as a company leader or a board decide to take a decision or need to take a decision, you want to make sure there's no group thinking, there's no fallacy in consensus, that you have data information, but most of the time you don't have the data because you're trying to predict the future of where the company needs to go and what is not going to happen. Most of the time they do a lot of companies do risk assessment, basically risk assessment, but risk is based on what has happened in the past or what could happen.

Uma Gopaldass:

But, there's an embedded risk of if you yourself are deciding this is the best direction, your brain sometimes tends to dispute the reasons why things will go wrong because you would need to go down that road, and what I do is I come in either as a board advisory or just an advisory to sit into some of the pitches of the direction or the strategy and kind of play devil's advocate if you will. I do some brain works or mind works, if you will, before a workshop of a leadership meeting, just to make sure it's very malleable, it's agile, they are able to pivot if they find themselves having a doubt in certain things, and then what lastly I do is everybody within the leadership or within the management who needs to be in execution are aligned and happy to go down the road.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow.

Uma Gopaldass:

So, that's how I do that.

Lyn Wineman:

I think that's what's so interesting about business, just like you said, you can come up with plans and you can hope that they will all work perfectly, but it's human beings who are executing those plans, and we all come into the arena with preconceived ideas and just things that hold us back, and I could see where that would be really, really helpful.

Uma Gopaldass:

Just to quickly add on that, nobody could have predicted COVID.

Lyn Wineman:

Right.

Uma Gopaldass:

And, the war that's going on right now with Ukraine as well. So, it's not always the case that it went wrong because they didn't catch themselves. So, scenario planning where a person like me has come in, I would bring in a lot of creative scenarios where you don't even think about things that can happen may happen.

Lyn Wineman:

That's a really good point. You are right, the last two years with COVID and social unrest and the war in Ukraine, all of those things have made it a very different world, things that a lot of businesses couldn't have predicted. So Uma, in your experience, what types of biases are the most detrimental for business leaders and how do they lead to errors in decision making?

Uma Gopaldass:

Absolutely, I kind of bucket biases into like four major types. So, your brain has this immense need for... Well, first of all, it needs to have meaning in any decision or anything you want to do. You're always seeking, I need to have the meaning behind something.

Lyn Wineman:

Right.

Uma Gopaldass:

And, then your brain is trying to remember things, so you have the need to remember things, and then there's all this information overload, so that goes hand in hand, but the main biases in businesses as human beings, we are leading a company or managing a company or working within the company is the need to be right. The need to be right, right now. So, the thing is being right versus being effective is two different things. So, that's where these kinds of biases kind of inflict us, and I talked a bit about that earlier on, a few of them like overconfidence in fact, egocentric biases, optimism bias, and the illusion of control.

Lyn Wineman:

Yes, the illusion of control. I like the way you said that.

Uma Gopaldass:

We have nothing in control. We can't control anything in life except your emotions and your behavior and your actions. False consensus is huge. I see it a lot in a pressure model, where you're pressured to perform and perform and shareholder, investor calls, we need to say this, we need to say that. That's the other one, which is self-serving biases, obviously we all need to be right, so we want to take out all the information that denies us that, and so forth. You get that meaning, the need to be right.

Lyn Wineman:

Yes. Wow, those are all good ones, and I think it's interesting because right now there's a lot of talk about bias as it relates to populations, cultures, different conditions, but you're really thinking of the biases of kind of the brain and leadership in a very different way.

Uma Gopaldass:

Yes, absolutely.

Lyn Wineman:

So Uma, what types of businesses do you typically work with and does your approach change depending on the industry they're in?

Uma Gopaldass:

Absolutely, so I love working for companies that have social impact mission. Today I focus a lot on B Corp certified companies, for public benefit companies. It makes my life easier because the values and missions are already the main motive. And so, my approach is honing on trying to make them profitable, and make sure they have the revenue to create those values. So, they have a different aspect of the problem is their goal needs to be the mainstay and they need to make revenue, and then with the profit-based company, it's going to be the reverse. Their motivation is always going to be profiting for shareholder interest or investor interest, and then the social impact and the value creation comes almost like, oh, we also did this.

Lyn Wineman:

Yes, and it's a reverse because KidGlov has been a Certified B Corp since November of 2021, and it's been really fascinating meeting leaders of other Certified B Corps because the consistency there is the focus on the social impact, and it's amazing as you talk to these leaders, how the profits and the success come alongside that, not the other way around.

Uma Gopaldass:

Absolutely, that's absolutely true, and I'm so happy that you got your B Corp certification.

Lyn Wineman:

Thank you, we are too. It was a lot of work, but well worth it.

Uma Gopaldass:

Oh gosh, yeah, and just a simple thing on that, the difference is that SROI versus ROI, return on investment versus social return on impact.

Lyn Wineman:

I love the way you said that. That is really great, that is great. So Uma, if there's a business leader listening today who isn't sure if they could benefit from the type of consulting you offer, what would you say to them?

Uma Gopaldass:

If you are going to bed unsettled about the business-

Lyn Wineman:

Yes.

Uma Gopaldass:

If you're waking up even more unsettled, dragging yourself out of bed, dreading the days in front of you because of work, because of the business, because of your position, and you need to think about

bringing in a third party, a governance person, someone who has had the ability to create clarity within that unsettledness, and that is what I would tell these folks with businesses, if they do... They're not sold on the idea of having someone like me coming in to give them clarity, then it's going to be really tough. It just gets a bit more muddy and muddy all over the place.

Lyn Wineman:

Which is where the Lotus comes in all over again, when things get muddy, and I think sometimes when things get muddy, you just think, I'm just going to put my head down, I'm going to just work harder and harder, and sometimes you just dig yourself deeper into the hole, I think. And so, having somebody from the outside that can kind of rise above and see the whole picture, who's experienced it before because I imagine in your work with a multitude of businesses, you've seen all of these situations and can help people with that. So, I really like that. So I'm curious, Uma, if there was anyone along the way on your path who helped influence the person you are today and your ideas about Leading Lotus.

Uma Gopaldass:

That's a really interesting question, and I'm happy you asked me that. There are, I would say, 20% of the people who have influenced me the right way through a great example as a leader, a couple of my bosses in the fields that I've worked in and they've showed me what great leaders do. They listen, they nurture, they provide, whether it's support, or tools, or mentors, and they champion you. Even when you're not ready, they champion you. They see beyond what your capability you think yourself can do. Most of us suffer from imposter syndrome, so we don't even know what we are capable of. So, I've had 20% of my career is influenced by great leaders. 80% of my life has been influenced by leaders who taught me how not to be.

Lyn Wineman:

It's a painful lesson, but often a really good one, right?

Uma Gopaldass:

Exactly, and they're not bad folks, or they didn't do anything crazy or anything. It's just you realize that over time that their struggles have created an environment where the company has suffered more than going the right direction and hitting those marks and the goals.

Lyn Wineman:

Uma, as you say that, I think many of us do go to college and we're trained to do the work we're going to do, whether that's business or finance or marketing or advertising or engineering or architecture, we're not often really trained to be great leaders, are we? There might be one leadership class in college out of four years, but that actual training of how to lead oftentimes is something you kind of have to pick up on your own as you go along or find supplementary training or to have a really great or really poor mentor that teaches you how to do that as well. So Uma, what are your hopes for the future? What do you see for Leading Lotus and yourself in the next five to 10 years?

Uma Gopaldass:

I hope to fairly soon start another venture that builds finance.

Lyn Wineman:

Ooh.

Uma Gopaldass:

So, like a capital venture company. I'll call it Bhumi. Bhumi in Sanskrit, in my language demo means Earth. So, Earth ventures or Earth capital, which is basically where my passion is to give back to Mother Earth. My name is Uma Devi, which is equivalent to Bhumi Devi, which is goddess of Earth.

Lyn Wineman:

I love that.

Uma Gopaldass:

It's weird that I've always loved the planet. Regardless the fact that I worked in oil and gas and mining-

Lyn Wineman:

Honestly, it probably added to your understanding of, and your love of the planet, I've got to believe. You understand the earth in a way that many of us do not.

Uma Gopaldass:

Absolutely, environmentally what needs to happen... We are human beings, we do consume. The problem is consumption is there so all of these industries will stay alive. So, instead of fighting against it, how do you help them become sustainable? How do you help them become environmentally conscious, develop technologies that save Mother Earth, while continuing to use what we need to not just over consume?

Lyn Wineman:

Right, that is great. Uma, I'm going to say I've found this whole conversation very inspirational, which is what makes this next question a lot of fun. Everybody who listens to the podcast knows that I am inspired by motivational quotes, and I'm hoping you can give us a few of your own words of wisdom for inspiration.

Uma Gopaldass:

Ah, okay. So, I have to go back to the lotus symbolism. So, one of my favorite quotes is, "Lead from beyond the mud and seek truth and clarity in your decisions."

Lyn Wineman:

I love that. I love that so much, that is very inspirational. So Uma, for our listeners who would like to learn more about you or Leading Lotus, maybe get in touch with you, what's the best way to find you?

Uma Gopaldass:

You can definitely find me... I'm pretty active on LinkedIn. So, that's Uma Devi Gopaldass, and you can also go to my website, www.leadinglotus.com.

Lyn Wineman:

That's fantastic. When you're naming a company anymore, making sure that that really great web address is available is always a really important thing, isn't it?

Uma Gopaldass:

Absolutely.

Lyn Wineman:

And for anybody who didn't get that, we'll make sure to have both your name spelling and that website address in the show notes on the website. So, as we wrap up our time together today, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work that you're doing?

Uma Gopaldass:

The most important thing about the work that I'm doing is to create value for the world. Create value, which translates to create value for your family, your spouse, your children, this community, the society, the planet, and then you're going to be happy.

Lyn Wineman:

I love that. That goes right back to you mentioned if you are having a situation where it's hard to go to work, hard to get up in the morning, hard to sleep at night, being able to link your daily work with giving back to the world is a really great way to cure that. Uma, I'm going to say I fully believe the world needs more people like you. I've really enjoyed this conversation. Thank you for taking time to share with us today.

Uma Gopaldass:

Absolutely, I love what you are doing, and I think the world needs a lot of us and you'll do great. Thank you for having me.

Lyn Wineman:

Fantastic.

Announcer:

We hope you enjoyed today's Agency for Change Podcast. To hear all our interviews with those who are making a positive change in our communities or to nominate a change maker you'd love to hear from, visit kidglov.com, at K-I-D-G-L-O-V.com to get in touch. As always, if you like what you've heard today, be sure to rate, review, subscribe, and share. Thanks for listening. And we'll see you next time.