

Pathways to Belonging and Influence:

Strategies and skills of the flourishing Canadians, born abroad

"Part of success is redefining success"

Tips from Lionel Laroche

Interviewer: Welcome to Pathways to Belonging and Influence: Strategies and skills of the flourishing Canadians, born abroad. This series of recorded conversations is a joint project between Bow Valley College and the Calgary Region Immigrant and Employment Council, or CRIEC. These conversations feature role models in the Calgary community who were not born in Canada, but have successfully established themselves and are flourishing members of Canadian society. They share with us their stories, their insights into establishing oneself in Canada and their strategies for success.

I am here today with Lionel Laroche. Lionel came to Canada from France after studying in the US, and started out as an engineer, navigating the Canadian job market in chemical engineering. He then completely changed his career, utilizing his strengths, knowledge and experience as a cross-cultural consultant, the principal at Multicultural Business Solutions.

In this conversation, Lionel will share strategies for success in establishing a career in Canada as a foreign trained individual and for navigating cultural differences in the Canadian workplace.

Welcome Lionel, thank you for joining us today to share what you have learned through your experience.

Lionel: My pleasure.

Interviewer: So Lionel, over the years, you've worked in many different roles and with many different professionals. Can you share with us some key lessons that you may have learned about establishing a career in Canada as an immigrant?

Lionel: I've worked with many, many immigrants over the years, as a coach, as a trainer, as a consultant, and I've seen, you know, when people arrive initially, they are overwhelmed by their situation. Most of us, because no matter how much you researched, in my experience, either you missed something because you didn't know you didn't know, or you did not interpret the information you got accurately, because you were in a completely different context. So, when people arrive, most people end up in a situation where they're surprised, and their morale just drops, because you get overwhelmed by change and how many things you have to adapt to.

Lionel: Some people get stuck in survival jobs. I'm sure you've seen that, okay, it's the engineer who's driving the cab, and that kind of stuff. But others bounce back. And so, over the years I've worked with a lot of people in both categories. Some who just got stuck and some who bounced back and went on to success. I kind of made a mental note of what made the difference between those who succeeded and those who didn't. So, I found there's really five characteristics that make the difference.

The first one is drive, it's a very obvious one, exactly what you said, persistence. The minute you stop trying, it stops. But drive by itself is not enough. You have plenty of immigrants who are driven but lack what's needed to go beyond that. They lack adaptability. So, the typical situation is the immigrant who has written one resume, sent it to 500 places, got no response, and keeps sending the same resume. That is drive without adaptability, *mm hm*, and drive without adaptability will usually get you into a survival job, but you won't go, it's hard to go much beyond that.

Another very important thing that people need is a positive attitude. We don't like sour grapes in Canada, you've got to smile. Okay, I mean this is, it's a fact of life. I mean this is something I had to learn because in France, we don't smile to strangers, and France is not unique. I mean it's like you go to anywhere in Western Europe. People do not smile to strangers, okay. *And if you come to Canada and you don't smile at someone on the street, they think you're very standoffish.* Yeah, but the problem is not in the street, because that person, we're not interacting. If you don't smile to people in the workplace, that's where it really has a big impact.

The other thing is, you need to keep your complaints to yourself because many immigrants, including myself, will start complaining about you know, this, that and the other thing and about how much better it is in my home country and so on. That will usually get you nowhere, and you will not get a lot of sympathy from Canadians. So, you can complain all you want at home, but, in the workplace, stick to the weather, okay. That you can complain endlessly about, no problem, but anything else, keep it to yourself. You need a sense of ownership. Yes, others can improve. Yes, the government can improve, okay. Regulatory bodies can improve, employers can improve, and so on. But in the end, it is your problem. You have to find your own solution. That's not easy, okay? I mean, I can tell you this one, because I know that we tend to own our successes and blame our failures on others, *Absolutely, it's much easier that way.* That's right, so owning our limitations is a big part.

And the last one that I find really, really important, in my experience, is the ability to see the world in shades of grey as opposed to black and white. Because cultural differences and managing cultural differences is all about realizing that there's more than one good solution. Some may be a little better than others, but there may be two, three, four, depending on the situation. Sometimes there is only one, okay, but in many cases, in many interpersonal things, situations, there's two or three approaches that would work reasonably well. Some that will neither work, nor fail, okay? And there's definitely several that will make things worse,

Lionel: as opposed to better. So, the ability to see that it's not just one right solution and everything else is wrong, okay. No, there's some that work better than others and so on. That is really critical in my experience. And when people see the world in binary terms, zero, one, right or wrong, black or white, usually they don't go very far. *Mmm hmm, it's very limiting.* Yeah. So those characteristics in my experience make a huge difference to the success of immigrants and also Canadians, I mean Canadians need those characteristics to succeed in Canada as well.

Interviewer: Um, now, when you were working as an engineer in Canada, did you encounter any challenges in the workplace that you learned from?

Lionel: There's so many of them and they go from the most basic things to the most complex ones in my experience. So, one which I remember very, very vividly because it took me a long time to master that skill, was how do you leave a voicemail that gets you a response? *Oh.* Yup, so, if you've seen the video that I recorded about that, the way I left voicemail messages at the time: "Hi, it's me, call me back." And so, when I left a voicemail like that to one of my coworkers at P&G either in Toronto or Cincinnati, I didn't get a response. And I was getting very frustrated, like, you know, why don't they call me back kind of thing, I need their help.

So it was a process, like first you know, wondering what the heck is going on, why don't they respond? And taking it personally, usually, like most people. And then, afterwards, I realized, okay, when they leave me a voicemail, it doesn't sound the same. And eventually I identified the pattern that they were using, and then I started to, "Okay, if that's the way they do it, I probably should do it the same way," so, now when I needed to leave a voicemail, I would take a piece of paper, write it down "Hi, this is Lionel, here's what..." and edit it. And, I remember like a 30 second voicemail would take me 15 minutes to prepare. And so, I get to the point, okay I'm happy with the voicemail, so now I'm reading the thing. And of course, my English, I stumble, whatever, so I re-record, record, record, erase. And I would say it took me a year and a half to get to the point to where I could leave a voicemail, *oh goodness*, just pick up the phone and just leave a voicemail that would get me a response.

Well, that one was what I would consider at the basic level. The complex ones: how do you resolve a conflict? Like, you have a disagreement with one of your coworkers in a meeting. You disagree about how, as an engineer, how do you solve a particular technical problem? I think it should be done this way. My coworker thinks it should be done that way. What are we going to do? And the problem I ran into on many, many occasions at the time is I would win the battle and lose the war. What I mean by that is I would argue my point so forcefully that people would essentially give up. *Mm hm.* And they would say, "Alright, fine, we'll do it your way." But, in the process, I had reinforced their perspective, their view of me, their evaluation of my performance in particular, and they had concluded that, well, I have terrible soft skills, therefore I am not suited for management or leadership, which is what I wanted to do. *Yes.*

Lionel: I would get what I wanted short term but by doing that, I would make it even harder to reach my long term goal. Understanding the importance of soft skills was, for me, one of the things that really changed my career trajectory and really became my mentor if I can put it that way. *Mm hm*. I mean now that I do workshops and help people deal with those issues, I emphasize that element tremendously, because to me it's like there's two elements. One is the relative importance of technical skills and soft skills and two, the fact that soft skills are measured by cultural standards. So, I had great soft skills by French standards, but I did not have good soft skills by Canadian standards. Understanding these elements was a major element in my change of trajectory and my progress.

Interviewer: Okay. So now, as an immigrant resettling in Canada and establishing your career, how do you define success?

Lionel: What I've found, and I mean this is true, it's true for me and it's true for many people that I've worked with. For many immigrants, part of success is redefining success. What I mean by that is most immigrants who come to Canada today come from countries that are significantly more hierarchical than Canada is. Cause most immigrants come from Asia, Africa, Latin America or Eastern Europe, okay. And if you add even Latin Europe, it's still very hierarchical relative to Canada. And in most hierarchical cultures, the way people define progress, or success, is title and the number of people who report to you. *So you really had to change your definition of success*. Absolutely, that was my definition of success when I came to Canada, like, I want to be CEO of a large company, that was my idea of success. And I realized, number one, I am never going to be in that position, okay, I do not have what it takes to get there, and number two is like no, I redefined success as how much influence I can have on people. So if I use my French definition of success, I am an abysmal failure *by those standards*, by those standards, okay. But if I look at how much influence I can have on Canadian society, there is no question that the influence I can have today is way greater than whatever influence I would have had if I had remained an engineer. And I find this is true for many, many successful immigrants, for sure, part of success is redefining what success is.

Interviewer: And, it's interesting, Lionel, that when things didn't work out the way you had hoped by French standards, yeah, instead of saying, okay I'm going to go back and retrain, go back to school, go learn different skills.

Lionel: I did think of it to be honest, okay, I mean like most, most immigrants, when things were not working, my idea was, okay, I'll go get an MBA. *Yes*. Okay. And this is a piece of advice I've given to many people I've coached, it's like because I've seen so many immigrants get into that same road block, it's like, well, I'm not getting anywhere so let me go get a degree, certificate, diploma, whatever. It's like, no, before you get that, figure out where do you want to be, let's say three to five years, or let's say two years, two or three years after you obtain whatever degree, certificate, or diploma you're thinking of getting. Where do you see yourself two or three years after that? And then work backwards. In other words, if you want to be "x" well, what are the building blocks needed to get to that? You might find that getting a degree is not the right thing, you might find it is, okay?

Lionel: I remember a number of people I coached were in the IT world. *Yes.* And in the IT world because they had a certification but it was out of date, getting the new one made a world of difference in their case, okay? *Because it was directly related to what they were actually doing at that time.* That's right, okay? Because when you look at 90% of the job postings, they ask for that certification, so clearly it is necessary in this case, okay? *Okay.* In many other cases, no, you don't need it. What you need is the experience, as opposed to the degree. And you need the network as opposed to the degree.

Interviewer: Okay, so, Lionel, you mentioned that through your company, Multicultural Business Solutions, you have created a series of videos. And since you have turned your career into helping other immigrants, um, these videos will be useful for the people listening. So, if you want to mention how they can connect to those videos that would be great.

Lionel: Sure, so these videos were created with funding from the provincial government of Alberta and they are designed to help people understand the challenges that immigrants face, *mm hm*, when they come to Canada, and so yeah, I would definitely encourage any immigrant who wants to succeed in Canada to watch them. The easiest way to find them is you go to YouTube and you put my name, Lionel Laroche, and the name of my company, Multicultural Business Solutions, and if you click on that, you will see a list of nineteen videos. So some are like five minutes, some are 20 minutes, okay, and they cover a lot of the topics that that I cover in my typical workshops and obviously they can be accessed anytime, anywhere, any place.

Interviewer: Wonderful, Thank you so much Lionel, I know that those will be really useful for people starting out in Canada and also people wanting to come to Canada and restart their careers here.

Lionel: Thank you.

Interviewer: Lionel, thank you so much for sharing about your own journey, and thank you so much also for all of the invaluable strategies that you've shared with us.

Lionel: My pleasure.

Interviewer: Thank you for joining us for this conversation with Lionel Laroche in the Pathways to Belonging and Influence series. Join us for our other conversations with flourishing Canadians born abroad to learn strategies for establishing yourself in Canada.