

Pathways to Belonging and Influence:

Strategies and skills of the flourishing Canadians, born abroad

“What are the barriers and how do you go around them?”

A conversation with Misheck Mwaba

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.

In this conversation, we'll be speaking with Misheck Mwaba. Misheck is originally from Zambia, and arrived in Canada in 2003 after studying and living in Zambia, England and the Netherlands. He is currently Vice President Academic at Bow Valley College.

Welcome Misheck. Thank you for joining us today to share with us your journey to becoming a flourishing member of society in Canada.

It's a pleasure Jennifer, thank you very much for inviting me.

Oh, you're most welcome.

Interviewer: Misheck, could you start by telling us a little bit about your background?

Misheck: I'm a trained mechanical engineer. I did my first degree in Zambia where I was born. And then my first job was in the mining industry. Worked there for one year, then moved to the University of Zambia. After one year I went for my masters in England. And completed that, went back to Zambia and taught for five years, and then went to the Netherlands to do my PhD, and after that I came to Canada.

Interviewer: So, what made you choose to come to Canada?

Misheck: I would say it was an accidental decision. Okay, and the reason I say that is when I was doing my PhD I came to Canada to present a paper, in Banff actually. Calgary was the first city I landed in Canada. And when I went to that conference I met a professor from Carleton University in Ottawa who was doing similar work and at that point he was looking for a Post Doc. So he asked me if that's something that would interest me. At that point, I said well I

Misheck: needed to go and ask my family and figure out if this is something that would be of interest. And when I went back after one week in Banff I did ask my family and the plan there was I was going to come to Canada, be a Post Doc for three years and then go back to Zambia.
And plans change, don't they?

Plans change, yeah.

Well we are very lucky, thank you, that you stayed in Canada.

Thank you.

Interviewer: So, how did you look for new opportunities?

Misheck: I looked for new opportunities by, I think talking to people. And looking at what things I can apply my skills to. I was just completing my Post Doc, *mm hm*, when some of the work I was doing I was discussing with an adjunct professor who used to work for Atomic Energy of Canada. And he encouraged me to apply for a job at Atomic Energy of Canada because he thought what I was doing could be used there.

Interviewer: So, conversations, then, have led you to come to Canada, to do your Post Doc. They led you to your first job in Canada. How important would you say networking is when you're starting out in a new country?

Misheck: I would say it's critically important. And I think if I just backtrack, networking sometimes doesn't come naturally. *Mm hm*. And I grew up in an environment where you normally don't talk about yourself. You let your actions demonstrate that, *okay*, and you act on the basis that, because I can do this, people will see what I can do and they'll give me a job. But I guess in the environment here networking is critically important especially if you are new to this country because people don't know you. I think people want to hear what you can do, and part of that is immersing yourself in communities or organizations or societies that you think you might meet somebody who can use your skills.

Interviewer: So was that hard for you when you first came to Canada? Because that's not the way you were used to sort of promoting yourself.

Misheck: It was very hard, yes. I think one of the things is when you make that decision that this is where you want to stay, part of that is asking a question of how do I integrate? And I think I read a lot of things and a lot of things were talking about networking, how important networking was. So I remember volunteering for things. I would volunteer to assist students, I would volunteer for the professional association of engineers just to understand what happens and it helps to talk to people as well.

Interviewer: What does it mean to you to integrate into Canadian society?

Misheck: I think what it means is to be part of the community and, and I always reflect back on my own journey, where, I was brought up in a different society, *mm hm*, that has different norms, different values and came to a country that has totally different customs, norms and values. And it's not about judging, but it's about thinking, "What are the good things that I can pick from this society, and what are the good things that I can share?" And I think at some point it's about reaching that common understanding. And remove the boundaries of tradition and think of, "If I'm going to live in this society, what are the things that I need to embrace and what are the things I need to tolerate?" Because tolerance comes in as well. So for me it's that balance of the things you embrace but also the things you should be prepared to tolerate.

Interviewer: So, apart from having to adjust, mm hm, to a different way that things were done in society, mm hm, and learning what you needed to embrace, mm hm, what you needed to tolerate, were there any other roadblocks or challenges that you faced when you were trying to establish yourself here?

Misheck: I think the greatest one as I reflect back is the recognition of foreign credentials. So when I reflect back at my journey, I got my Bachelor's Degree in Mechanical Engineering in Zambia, *yes*, I got my Master's in Mechanical Engineering in the UK, *yes*, and I got a PhD in the Netherlands. When I came here, and the first time I tried to get a license as a Professional Engineer, one of the responses I got was that I was going to be assigned a number of exams. *Mm hm*, Now those exams are not cheap, that's one, but the second thing is I used to teach at Carleton University part time, I taught at the University of Ottawa, and some of the subjects they were asking me to write are subjects that I taught and assessed and really my question was "Were graduates from those universities going to be asked to write that?" So I looked at that as a barrier. So I think I was helped because of understanding the education system here, so what I was able to do was to really look at my course outlines when I did my Bachelor's degree, *mm hm*, and wrote exactly what I had covered and attached my transcript there. And wrote a letter basically that asked if I have to write the exams, what in here have I not covered? And I'm glad that after I did that, they exempted me from the academic requirement and I was just able to write the, the ethics *mm hm*, and the professional law.

I think a lot of people face that when they come with credentials. They're faced with proving that they know it, even though they have the credentials.

Right, and that's a big challenge, and I think some people just give up, *yes*, for several reasons. If I look at my situation, if I didn't have that package of course outlines, *mm hm*, I don't think I would have built an adequate case. *Right*. Yeah, so, there could be things that you don't have the information and you just give up.

That's actually really good advice to give to someone, to have those course outlines, exactly, so that you can state what you've done, what you've covered. Exactly.

Interviewer: So besides being able to submit those course outlines and being able to state what it was that you had studied, what was it about your personality or about your approach to establishing yourself in Canada that helped you overcome barriers?

Misheck: That's a tough question, I will try to answer it as best as I can. I think once you make a decision that you are going to live in another environment, part of that now is figuring how do I succeed or establish myself in this environment? So it requires to do a lot of research and find out exactly the people who succeed what are the things that they do? What are the barriers and how do you go around? So I've just given an example about my professional barriers and I count myself fortunate that I already understood the system here. So at least because I was in the post-secondary I could understand what is being taught and I was able to build a story around that.

The third one I think I would say is to talk to people who have gone through this journey themselves, how did they resolve issues? Because when you talk to two people you find that the issues might be different and you might be facing both issues, *right*, so if you talk to different people, I think you get a variety of challenges, but also, really a rich suite of information of how they handled that. *Wonderful, so do your research by talking to people who've already taken that path.* Mm hm.

Interviewer: Was there anyone who influenced you, or supported you or helped you when you first came to Canada, or partway through your journey?

Misheck: Yeah, I think a lot of people. It's, you know that question is always challenging, because if I mention names, then you run the risk of missing some names, *right*, but I think I would say, when we came here, the first family is a family friend who immigrated here, I think five years before we arrived, *mm hm*, and they opened their house for us to live with them as we were figuring out, what next? *Wonderful.* So I think that made our transition much easier when we came in. *And they had already taken the path so they were able to help you.* Exactly, yeah. I think the other one is the professor who gave me the first break. He is also an immigrant, *mm hm*, and I think he understood the challenges that people were facing and I think that break kind of helped me understand some of the things I needed to do, how I needed to position my papers, and I think opened some doors for me.

Interviewer: What is one thing that you think helped you the most?

Misheck: I think the courage to represent my abilities and potential. Like, like I said, I grew up in an environment where you don't blow your own horn, *mm hm*, so I think it required a lot of effort for me to transition to a place where I'm able to articulate what my strengths were, what I can do, and give concrete examples of what I've done which relates to what is being asked. *Wonderful, that is quite a change, isn't it for you?* Mm hm, it's a big change.

Interviewer: Was there a moment where you felt like you had integrated, Canada was home now, this was your place?

Misheck: I still have a special place in my heart for Zambia, that's where I was born, *absolutely, absolutely*. I still have a lot of family there. But, I guess to answer your question, if you come from a country where hockey's not played and you are watching game 7, *uh huh*, of the Stanley Cup Final, and you are cheering for your Canadian team, I think that speaks to, to the integration. *It's become your second home*, Yeah, exactly, and when I reach the point where I can sing Oh Canada without looking at the lyrics, I think that meant something. *That's fabulous. Good for you!*

Interviewer: What do you feel is your greatest strength?

Misheck: Well, I'll tell you what other people have told me. One of the things they've told me is I listen a lot. *Mm hm*, And I think the reason I do that is I try to understand what the situation is before I can give advice or before I can speak. But in that listening part is also a lot of reflection. I try to say, is there anything I can learn from this particular event?

Interviewer: So, what do you say to yourself at times when you're challenged? What would you encourage others to say to themselves when they might think, "This is impossible, I don't know if I'm going to be able to do that?"

Misheck: Well first is to remove the word impossible from the vocabulary. *Wonderful*. And the second thing is to just take a deep breath and reflect and think about the bigger problems this world has. So when we are looking at our problems, there are bigger problems that people face elsewhere. *Mm hm*. So if those people have been able to overcome those challenges and move on, maybe our problem is not that challenging at all. So it's really thinking about how can I go around this obstacle? Because life is really full of obstacles. I read something a long time ago that says a path that's very smooth is a path that leads nowhere. So every path is going to come with challenges and it's figuring out how do I handle this obstacle?

Interviewer: So, do you have any advice? What would you tell someone who was coming to Canada and needed to start their career over here?

Misheck: So, the first thing is to do a lot of research, *mm hm*, about Canada. The second thing, especially if this is people who haven't even arrived in Canada, is really to carry as much evidence as possible of their achievements, of the things they've done, of the things they can do. The third thing is to clearly communicate now to the others about those skills, the knowledge they know. I think Canada is a place where people need to hear from you, *yes*, that you can do this. People need to see evidence that you've done that in the past, people need to be shown that you are capable of doing that. So people need to, if they are coming here, they need to have that ability to say, I'm going to show you that I can do this.

Interviewer: Well, Misheck thank you so much for joining us today, for sharing your own story and for sharing your insights into coming to Canada, establishing yourself in Canada and finding your career.

Misheck: Thank you very much Jennifer, it's been a pleasure and I hope this can help somebody overcome their challenges and settle nicely in Canada.

Interviewer: Thank you for joining us for this conversation with Misheck Mwaba 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.