Get Your Inside Onside Before You Go Outside

Kerry Anne MacDougall on intentional growth, leadership alignment and the human side of business.

Kerry Anne MacDougall

KA MacDougall Consulting

Adapted from an interview with Kerry Anne MacDougall of KA MacDougall Consulting by Bianca McGregor, CEO of the Greater Charlottetown Area Chamber of Commerce, at Speakers Corner at Confederation Court Mall on October 21, 2026.

What led you to advise business owners, and what is your story?

I started my first business from my living room. When I decided to grow, I rented my first office, about 500 square feet. My dad helped me paint it, and I was so proud to be out of the house and have that small space. The business grew very organically. I hired one person, then two, and met my business partner, and together over about 15 years we grew it.

Around year 12, I began thinking about an exit. We explored different opportunities to scale the business, brought in people to help us grow, and learned a tremendous amount along the way. In March 2024, I transitioned out of Insight and launched my own consulting practice.

Today, I help established business owners navigate growth - strengthening what they've already built while planning strategically for what's next.

I find deep fulfilment in it because business ownership can be isolating. When you start, your friends and family want to talk about your business. When you are three or five years in, those chats are less welcome around the dinner table. You start to outgrow a lot of the advice. I have felt and experienced all of that. So alongside strategy, frameworks and processes, there is a very human element to my work that I am deeply passionate about.

What does intentional growth mean, and how do you know a business is ready to grow?

Growth looks like many things. Some clients come to me because they know growth is coming and want to align their teams and establish a clear vision. But growth does not always feel exciting. It can be painful. You start a business because you are passionate, you do a great job and you build a clientele. Then you need more capacity to deliver, and suddenly the passionate owner has overhead, rent and a team to lead, and is no longer doing the thing they love. That is a growth moment.

Often people come to me not asking for a strategic plan but saying, "I feel heavy and I don't know where to go, and I don't have anyone to talk to." That is not a negative. It signals that the way you ran the business to get here is not how you will run it to get to what is next. Growth is also strengthening the business you have already grown.

What separates a strategic plan that sits on a shelf from one that changes how a business runs?

One of my favourite sayings, which I use daily, is that you have to get your inside onside before you go outside. A lot of strategic planning happens around boardroom tables, by committee, when the people leading the ship are a little uncertain themselves. A plan comes off the shelf when the people responsible for it understand where they're going, why it matters, and what they're accountable for.

I once took my team to a horse facility for leadership training. The facilitator asked me to lead a horse named Daisy around the arena. I cheered her on, "Come on, Daisy, you can do it!" and Daisy did not move. She was not listening to my words. She picked up on my intention and my energy, and she knew I had no idea where I was going. It is a great leadership lesson. As the owner or leader, you have to know full well where you are going and why to lead.

A big part of my work, before we ever write a plan, is asking where you are going, whether people will want to follow you there and how you will lead through it. Too often plans are created and rolled out, and people do not understand the bigger picture of why they are doing what they are doing.

What does it take to become a bigger employer, and what gets in the way?

The biggest mistake is thinking you run an organization of 200 people the way you run one of five. It is a completely different way of thinking and a very different structure. With a handful of people, your values and your way of working spread through proximity and osmosis. As you add layers you need more communication and different leadership.

Recruitment and retention are the two biggest issues, and what it takes today is different from three, five or ten years ago. I am working with a very traditional firm right now on a study about what the next generation of workers values. They may have different expectations around work, career progression and work-life balance than previous generations. The old model of falling asleep at your desk every night isn't necessarily what people aspire to anymore.

Core values get laughed at because we put them on the wall and forget them. When owners are frustrated with employees or culture, it is often unspoken expectations. They have operated by their own sense of right and wrong for so long that they have never articulated it or held people accountable to it. Going from 10 employees to 100 is painful if you do not think through those things.

What is the Women Presidents' Organization?

It's an international peer advisory organization for women business owners, and I'm proud to be a member. I travel to Halifax once a month to meet with my chapter.

In our group you are not really allowed to give advice to someone with a challenge. You share a personal story of a time you navigated something similar and how it landed.

Sometimes it is simply nice to work with someone who has been there.

You can read the books, listen to the podcasts and ask ChatGPT how to write a strategic plan. What makes the work rewarding is the humans and the nuance, being seen and heard and worked through something by someone with both knowledge and life experience.

How can an owner start a conversation with you, and when?

Connect with me and share where you're at. If I'm not the right person I'll help you figure out where to turn.

Growth takes all sorts of shapes. Some people call and say, "I'm ready to grow, let's plan and let's bring people along."

But if you feel the weight of it, if on a Sunday night you are bracing for Monday morning, when you go back to drinking from the fire hose and reacting, you are not alone. That is what business looks like for some, and it is hard to be vulnerable about it.

By the time I work with a client, a lot of trust has been established, and it is rare for someone to call and say "come in and I'll tell you everything." Vulnerability is critical in business, and it comes from building trust.

Is there anything you would like people to take away?

Get your inside onside! Be really in touch with what drives and motivates you, so you can lead an organization with intention, focus and passion. So many of the decisions we make, in business and in life, are influenced by how we feel. If you want employees to keep coming to work, make them feel something. If you want customers to buy from you, help them feel something. Strategic planning processes are often so systemized that we forget the feeling side. Purpose, vision and values are an important part of intentional and fulfilling growth.

LEARN MORE

- KA MacDougall Consulting
- Women Presidents' Organization

Provincial CREDIT UNION

Speakers Corner is proudly sponsored by Provincial Credit Union.