

## Something Extra EP 116 - Shavon Lindley

**Lisa:** Chromosomes. Little strands of nucleic acids and proteins are the fundamental genetic instructions that tell us who we are at birth. Most people are born with 46 chromosomes, but each year in the United States, about 6,000 people are born with an extra chromosome, making them a person with Down syndrome. If you've ever encountered someone with Down syndrome, you know that they are some of the kindest, most joyful people you will ever meet. They truly have something extra.

My name is Lisa Nichols and I have spent the last 24 years as both the CEO of Technology Partners and as the mother to Ali. Ali has something extra in every sense of the word. I have been blessed to be by her side as she impacts everyone she meets. Through these two important roles as CEO and mother to Ali, I have witnessed countless life lessons that have fundamentally changed the way I look at the world.

While you may not have an extra chromosome, every leader has something extra that defines who you are. Join me as I explore this something extra in leaders from all walks of life and discover how that difference in each of them has made a difference in their companies, their families, their communities, and in themselves.

I'm excited to have Shavon Lindley on the show today. Shavon is the CEO and co-founder of ion Learning. Well, Shavon, I'm so glad we were able to make this work. You're all the way in San Diego, beautiful San Diego and I'm in cold St. Louis right now.

**Shavon:** [laughs]

**Lisa:** Thank goodness for technology, right, where we can do this kind of things.

**Shavon:** It is such a blessing and a beautiful thing.

**Lisa:** Yes, it is. I cannot wait for our listeners to hear your story.







**Lisa:** Perfect fit there. Then you excelled because you became the number one financial advisor. What often happens is you were asked then I believe every new hire, they wanted you to train the new hires [laughs] because you take your top performing person and you said, "If we can just replicate that person." Then you started doing that, but you had, I believe, Shavon, what you would consider an a-ha because you said, "I probably need a mentor now." [chuckles] But you look around and there were no other females, right?

You didn't have a female mentor, but that kind of was the precipice I feel like or the catalyst maybe to push you into even what you're doing today. You founded an organization called Women Evolution.

**Shavon:** Yes, I did. What ends up happening when you are at a moment where something is so out of integrity with what you're meant to do in your life, things start to break down. Health can start to deteriorate, you become unhappy, things just aren't working out, and so those can be very frustrating but those are all signs that something is out of alignment with what your core values are.

I didn't have any of that recognition or hadn't done any of that leadership development work, but in hindsight, looking back, that's what was really going on. At this time, yes, I'm financially successful, but everything else was a disaster. 12 hour days, weekends, just grinding, because it's a commission-based business, that's it. You perform and close business to be able to make a living, and so that just was the culture of the industry.

It was told, right, the more you work, the more you are rewarded. Not that I believe that today, but that was what was instilled at that particular time. When everything felt, although, yes, financially was successful, but everything else was out of alignment, that's where I was so sick. I was getting bronchitis every single month, I was just again, so unhappy. I happened to walk into the elevator that day to work and saw someone who I would normally run into on our way, and he worked across in another office across the way.

He was like, "How are you doing today?" Normally, I would say, "I'm doing fine. I'm great, how are you?" This day, I was like, "I'm not doing well. I am sick all the time, and I don't know what to do." He just gave me some advice there and opened up and it really bonded us at that time. That's where I first realized you got to tell people how you're feeling.

You've got to be honest, and real and authentic, and genuine around where you're succeeding and where you're failing because that's when you get to open up and people can support you in that way. That was like the first, I would say, piece of mentorship advice that I got that I needed then to say, "Okay, there's something that is trying to tell me that I need to shift." I started to seek out and recognize, "Well, what's missing in my life? What do I not have?" When I walked into my office, I saw all of these white men, there is no one else that's like me, no one else that really seemed to have, or wants, a family or was talking about that either, but also a career. That's when I said, "Okay, I need to go out and find diverse individuals that are leading in a different way that can inspire me because I'm not getting it here in my workplace." That set me out on this journey to go find others who have done this before, that looked different than what is around me right now.

**Lisa:** You were feeling some rumbling in your soul that something just wasn't right. Your health was suffering. You're doing good on this leg of the stool, financially, but then everything else was suffering. When you feel that angst in your spirit, it's like, "It may be time to step back and take a look at the big picture." Secondly, you got to tell people how you're feeling and be authentic about it.

Authenticity is so important, right? It does require some vulnerability there, and I think vulnerability is a very important trait. Really, if you don't tell people, then how do they know? He spoke a word into you that day and the word mattered. It was something that gave you the confidence then to go, "Now, I probably need to do a pivot, I need to do a shift here."

**Shavon:** Absolutely. When you are willing to talk about successes and failures, it humanizes you and this has been what I have found...



**Lisa:** Welcome back. Shavon, I'm absolutely loving this conversation, and I realized that you and I probably need about 10 hours with one another to even scratch the surface here. You've already shared so many of the lessons that you've learned, but are there other ones that you would like to tell our listeners about?

**Shavon:** From an entrepreneurial, even in someone who's in the corporate space, but a lot of times, as being someone who's owned their own business for a long time, and as you're growing a business, one of the biggest lessons that I had to learn the hard way. This is when I was still in the financial planning career business, and I knew that I wanted to get into helping create inclusive workplace cultures.

I had this opportunity to be a potential contributing writer for Forbes, and that was like I knew that was going to catapult me to be able to go do my full passion, but I still was financially being supporting that passion with the financial planning business. I had one foot over here and one foot over here, and logical financial brain said, "When you make enough money over here, that equals the money you make over here, then that's when you make the shift because that just does make sense on paper."

Well, I'm having this coaching session with this leadership coach, and she said, "I don't know if Forbes is for you. What I do know is that your business and creating inclusive cultures and scaling the learning and development model and creating peer learning spaces, that, that is your soul path. That financial planning is not, and you need to get out of that business." I was like, "Well, how am I going to support myself? Do I do that now? Do you mean six months from now?" This is what she said to me, she said, "When things are right, they happen clear, easy and fast. All you have to do is to take one step, and if that step is easy, you take the next step."

I know like now that sounds like the most simplistic thing in the world, but at the time, I'm like, "Oh, how do I get rid of a financial planning business?"





One of our spiritual mentors is Dr. Richard Blackaby, and I'll never forget him saying one time, "There may be something brand new that's on the horizon for you, a brand new assignment. If you're running 200 miles an hour though, you have to make margin for something new." That's why it's so important, I think, for us to be very centered and principled, so that we can begin to say no to some things.

I hate to say no because I am a pleaser, I love to please people, I want people to be-- I want to help people, but the reality is, you cannot always do that. That brings me to my next question because I do believe that just as we have to have purpose in our businesses or organizations, we also have to have a personal purpose. What is your purpose statement for your life, Shavon?

**Shavon:** My purpose is to inspire inclusion, and when I do that, others are able to fulfill their purpose, and I'm able to live my purpose. When I look at a company, when I serve companies, or if I'm talking to individuals, I know that innovation is at its greatest when we all, the collective in all these different viewpoints and perspectives are able to come and be heard and recognized and valued at the table. If we do not have an inclusive culture, then we will not be able to innovate at our greatest capacity, we will not be able to achieve the missions that we are set out as an organization. My goal is to inspire that inclusion so that we all can fulfill our purpose.

**Lisa:** I love that. Every person seriously, if you don't know what your purpose is, take some time to be introspective and think, what am I created to do? Then like Shavon said, go do it, [chuckles] take that first step. What is it? The journey of a thousand miles starts with the first step. Love that. That brings me up to what you're doing today with ion. You got a very particular philosophy, and I know, I'd read something that you said, where it can't just be a half a day seminar for an organization. To change behavior, it's got to be more than that. Tell me about your philosophy, tell me what you're doing with ion, and why you believe small groups, diverse groups works the best.

**Shavon:** What we do at ion is we've developed a social learning platform, this is a new way to develop leaders remotely, you don't need to be in a classroom, and we've known for a really long time that the way that we deliver training and workplaces is not the most effective, completion rates for programs are super low. On average, completion rates around 15% for online learning, but that's really the greatest tool that companies use to scale learning throughout a company, especially in a remote company where we are now.

Companies are having to think about a new way of delivering learning, but from the beginning, learning hasn't really been the most effective structure, but what we do know when we look at research is that learning needs to be spaced out and repeated over time, it needs to change the way you think, how you feel, and what you do. You have to have time to go apply the skill, and practice it, and then to come back and reflect personally. Then also within a safe environment with diverse peers, where together you hold each other accountable, to follow through with everything that you say that you're going to do.

This is what we know as the most effective way to learn. From the beginning of time, people know that learning in small groups is the most effective way, study groups in college, schools are starting to put people in small groups, but in the workplace, we haven't really-- That has just very having very grassroots, there hasn't been any technology platform yet until ion to help companies create, scale, measure and manage small group diverse learning throughout an organization and really optimize that structure with a framework that says this is how-- You have a course, you want to teach that course, this is how you break that course up, here's where you make small group learning occur, here's the cadence, the structure, and a management platform to help you do it all in one, and that's what we've been able to create.

**Lisa:** You guys have got different modules, so do you want to talk about that at all? If say a company says, "I understand we need to focus on D&I, but how do we even start?" What would you say?



You want this group to meet typically over a bounce six sessions, and that structure alone by putting diverse people into small safe groups, no more than four in size will create the space for people to be open to learning, to share their story. Remember, we started earlier with this podcast around how important storytelling is. This environment allows storytelling, for people to open up safely because they don't think they're sabotaging their career doing it in a board meeting, but they'll do it in this small safe group.

**Lisa:** Sure.

**Shavon:** They'll tell their story, and that's where they start to realize how much more in common than we have different, and then that's where they get to practice inclusion in real-time, challenge the biases that they may have had against people from different departments, different ages, different-- Anything different can cause a threat in our brain.

**Lisa:** Ion can lead you through all of this. You even use artificial intelligence to even match the people, so the company doesn't even have to do that piece. I see a lot of other benefits and perks that come out of this. I bet you, when companies engage with something like this, employee engagement probably goes out the roof.

**Shavon:** 100%. Literally, someone emailed us just three days ago saying, "I've never wanted to work harder for a company in my life because I'm finally given a support system in the workplace, I feel like my ideas are being heard and valued." This is what people have been craving and needing. That deep human connection is so important, and so this framework can work. If you're just starting out, you don't need a technology to help you create the algorithms for massive amounts of groups.

We serve companies that are normally 3,000 plus employees or more, but no matter what size, we do it. When we only had four employees, we started this, because there's four of us or three of us, and we learn together in these groups and alternate between learning and small, diverse peer groups, and we've got a research study that backs this up.

I would say if you're wanting to dig into the nitty-gritty on the research behind it, we've got a really cool research study that we spent nine months on and some extraordinary results to share why this method is so powerful, and then the ion platform just helps optimize and scale it for any content.

We also have content ourselves that we support organizations with. Let's say someone comes and says, "Hey, do you have anything off the shelf?" We have a curriculum that we've designed that's already locked and loaded, that companies are focusing on, and it's all based on leadership development that has an inclusion focus, all of our courses have that because that's what we are most passionate about, but then we also help companies design their own, take courses that they have currently in place and help them adapt it to the ion framework and use our platform as well so that they can administer and scale that too.

**Shavon:** I love every piece of what we've talked about. Shavon, this is something extra, so I have to ask you, and I think I know what you're going to say, [laughs] but what is this something extra that every leader needs?

**Lisa:** I believe leaders need to disrupt exclusionary behavior, they need to speak up when they see something or they experienced or witnessed something where others are being excluded, and to leverage that position that they hold, the privilege and privilege sometimes can cause people to feel funny, privilege just means an advantage. You have an advantage because you have a certain position in an organization.

To leverage our advantages and the power that we have to disrupt exclusionary behavior, to change processes and systems, to give a voice to someone else when they maybe don't necessarily have the same amount of position or authority as you do, so leveraging that. Not being afraid to speak out about social issues and using our platforms that we have for good in this world with businesses can serve all of those purposes.



