



Words Matter: How Gui Costin Built a Culture of Kindness and Excellence

WITH GUI COSTIN

The Notable Leaders' Radio Podcast

BELINDA PRUYNE: Welcome, Gui. I am so excited to have you here and for you to share your journey of how you've become all that you are today. So welcome.

GUI COSTIN: Great, thank you very much for having me. I appreciate being here.

BELINDA PRUYNE: OK, so let's just jump into it. Who were your biggest influences when you were growing up, and what was it that they taught you?

GUI COSTIN: Well, definitely my mother, unquestionably. She was a great entrepreneur, interior decorator, started her business in 1985, and had just so many good one liners. She's ridiculously positive person. She's 80 years old today, looks very young, cool, vivacious, just awesome person. And I think one of the greatest lines she ever dropped on me was "when in fear, get into action." So that's definitely been just something I've always lived by. And she married my stepfather in the '70s, and he's just always been such a positive influence and positive guy in my life. So definitely those two are absolutely the two guiding lights of my life.

BELINDA PRUYNE: Yay, and I love that you, first of all, your mom sounds like somebody I'd like to sit down and just have a chat with because I'm sure she's got some good stories. But I love her advice to you, so that's very cool. How do you think some of that has played a part in you as you grew up and through college and choosing to go into the areas that you did? Because you have your own business, successful business, for a long time now. Did mom play a role in that, maybe?

GUI COSTIN: Yeah, there's no doubt that they were very influential and just being very supportive of everything I was doing. I mean, being highly entrepreneurial individual-- I think I had 14 jobs in 17 years, so good W-2, but I was kind of skipping every 12 to 18 months, which is not a good recipe for long-term career success. So I settled in '06, and we started the business, but they were just so supportive all along the way, which I would say that was one of the biggest things, is just having that support versus constantly being judged. They were really great about that. And ironically, my stepfather today, he joined us in January of 2023. So the world kind of comes full circle, which is pretty fun.

BELINDA PRUYNE: Oh, that is cool. What's that like, working with your stepdad?

GUI COSTIN: So great. It's great. He doesn't mess with me at all. I don't mess with him. And he's just super supportive of me. And he does really, really well. He's 81 years old, and he's actively involved and is a really good producer at the company. So it's been really fun to have him on board.

BELINDA PRUYNE: Oh my gosh, well, maybe I need to sit down with both of them. I'm not sure. So you have this strong drive, and an example of that is you and your friends saw a problem, and you wanted to solve it, and you created Worthy Events, and where you just developed a software program, because that's what everybody does when they see a problem.

GUI COSTIN: Yeah?

BELINDA PRUYNE: Yeah. So where did that drive come from? And how did that come to play in Worthy Events and everything else?

GUI COSTIN: Well, there was a really amazing entrepreneur back in the early '90s that I went to college with named Halsey Minor, and he was the original-- kind of one of the first guys in the internet. CNET was his company, and he was an investor in a bunch of good companies. And we started a golf business that allowed two people to log in, in the late '90s, and was an internet business where you could compete against each other because I was on the college golf team. And if you're playing different golf courses, well, we couldn't quite figure out a financial model, a revenue model for that business. And it was Halsey's idea that said, hey, listen, what you should do is start a business that allows schools and have their class agents-- if you graduated from college in, let's say, 1995, and then you were to fund, raise, create a platform where you could allow people to log in and then send emails to their classmates to raise capital for whatever classes or whatever events. So that was how Worthy Events came along. That was Halsey's idea. And he gave us some capital to go build that.

BELINDA PRUYNE: I love it. You kind of focus in real estate now, don't you?

GUI COSTIN: Real estate and investments, yep.

BELINDA PRUYNE: Yeah. Why real estate?

GUI COSTIN: Real estate I knew because it was what my uncle had done. It was my first job out of college. For the first 10 years, I was in the real estate business. Then I started raising money for real estate fund. And then it was just natural, where I ended up with another real estate firm in '05, and then came up with an idea while I was at that firm, just for a product idea, and partnered with one of the largest real

estate players in the country, a firm in Cleveland, and we partnered with them to launch a product in 2006 they called a fund of funds. We launched that in 2006 and built two really good products, and that really launched our firm.

BELINDA PRUYNE: So I think you took your mom's advice to heart, when you feel that fear, get busy, keep going, right?

GUI COSTIN: Oh my gosh, it's just incredible how-- because listen, if there's 8 billion people on the planet, there's 8 billion different things going on in our different heads. And fear is one of them that we all feel in different ways. And if you just get into action towards a goal, whatever that goal might be, it kind of makes that fear go away. So it's one of just the great lessons in life.

BELINDA PRUYNE: I love it. What did you learn about yourself? Because I know, when I became my own business owner, I was like, I wish I'd known when I signed up that I was actually signing up to join one of the world's largest and most complex personal development courses ever. So what did you learn about yourself as you were stepping into this?

GUI COSTIN: Well, I mean, you really learn about leadership. My third book is going to be Be Kind, which is a book on leadership and culture.

BELINDA PRUYNE: I love it.

GUI COSTIN: And it's kind of my number one thing. And that's an evolutionary process. And it's why a 23-year-old person can't really write a book on culture and leadership. I mean, they could if they're kind of writing about what happened to them in high school and college. But

as you become a young adult and an adult, you begin to realize things about other people. And it's helping other people. And you can't have an organization without people. That means every business, every church, every organization, every team is a people business. And that's how you treat your people, and there's just not-- too many people, I believe-- and this is kind of going to be the point, one of our chapters is going to be permission. And the point is, we give we give ourselves too much permission to say whatever we want at work. And they say, but you wouldn't say that stuff to your grandmother.

BELINDA PRUYNE: That's a good barometer, actually, right?

GUI COSTIN: You wouldn't. You get a little like, honey, sweetie, I don't think you intended to use that tone of voice with me.

BELINDA PRUYNE: I have a book that's in process, and it's like, oh, did you really just say that? Well, I know communication is a big thing with you, and you talk about the power and the impact of words. Where did that level of awareness and perspective come from? And how do you carry it with you today?

GUI COSTIN: It's always fascinating to me. I was a rhetoric and communications major at the University of Virginia, if you can believe that. It's always fascinating-- words are always fascinating to me. So there's so many great books on writing and simplicity and clarity, and really clarifying your thoughts as you have to put it in writing, which is tough these days, just because everything that we have going on with technology and voice and everything. But writing is great, and I love the idea of being able to communicate a clear message to people where you can really break through the noise. I mean, it's an art form, and I've

always loved it. And being a leader, being clear in your communication is basically, I think, everything.

BELINDA PRUYNE: I think it's the key, one of the keys that's the difference between a good leader and a great leader is their ability to communicate. And we're going to work on them. You're going to become better. Well, that implies that I'm broken. How about we're going to work in-- and the work that we're going to do is allow you to become even better than you currently are, or learn even more than you already do. And it's interesting, just throwing a word in there changes the way somebody can receive it.

GUI COSTIN: Yeah, words matter. That's my one of my lines internally, that words matter. Details matter and words matter.

BELINDA PRUYNE: The other thing, when I was doing my research on you, that I discovered that I really liked was you said, be an obstacle remover, a problem solver, and don't go soft on excellence. Tell us about that. What does that mean to you?

GUI COSTIN: Well, I think the number one job of a leader, especially-- I mean, you name the organization, again, whether you're a team, a coach, it could be a charitable organization, it could be a business, whatever it might be, is you have to remove obstacles so people can get their job done. Because, really, they're looking to you to remove those obstacles. If they were the obstacle remover, they'd be the leader. And that's where a leader really has to understand what their responsibilities are. And one of them is that responsibility for having someone's back, but taking all the obstacles away, giving them the resources they need to be successful. And then, as it relates to excellence. Excellence is something that I believe you aspire to. It can

never be achieved. It's an aspirational thing, and we're all about excellence. But excellence is kind of defined in so many different ways by the organization, by the people, but it's always achieving that level of excellence. And not everybody wants to sign up to come work at a firm or a company or be part of a team that's achieving that, which I get. And so that means it's not necessarily for everybody. But it's really fun being part of an organization that is always trying to be the best we can be in whatever it might be. Our office design-- so when people come in the office, it's inviting-- our logo, our branding, the events we throw. If you start to think about-- and then, of course, our products, how we treat our customers, we've always had a white glove approach to our customers and how we treat them. So we're available m 24/7, things like that. And once you set that standard, then everything kind of just approaches that, so it's been really fun to live that way.

BELINDA PRUYNE: In that environment, do you reward risk, people throwing out ideas that ultimately are like, yeah, no, but might spur on deeper conversations? Is that part of that?

GUI COSTIN: Absolutely. I mean, I don't think that-- absolutely. I mean, every idea is a good idea. There's absolutely no doubt about that. Every idea is a good idea. And you want to encourage everyone to have ideas. And it's funny, when it's so much part of us, I don't even probably think of it as much even to articulate it as clearly as I'd like to, but it's all about trying new things. And I would say that one thing I think you're sort of getting at is that as a company grows and you have long-term teammates doing certain jobs, that's the holy grail. However, one thing that I'm learning, you just have to be a little careful is staying, doing the same thing over and over again and not asking why and making sure you're evolving is really important. And so making sure that your-- we just had one of our-- we call them W days, or our monthly off-sites, and

it's what's working, what's not working. And I always check in a theme. The theme this week, this past month, was why. And Simon Sinek-- why? Why are we doing what we're doing, and then unpacking that, and then that can really blossom into so many different things to improve what you're doing.

BELINDA PRUYNE: I love that. Imagine how much fun that would be to work in a company like that. For all the listeners here, that's probably one of our dreams is to be with somebody that says, well, let's go for it. Because I always say, you can't solve today's technology with yesterday's technology. You can't solve today's technical problems using yesterday's technology. So how wonderful that you have a place and a forum for people to come in and say, is it still relevant? Is it still achieving the level of excellence that we're going for? I think you might have some people that want to come work with you at the end of this podcast, and I mean that sincerely, I really do. I've heard you talk about the importance of vulnerability as a leader. Would you tell us what you mean by that?

GUI COSTIN: Sure. That's probably the number one thing, right? Because vulnerability, whether it's the opposite of that, is, hey, I'm going to be taken advantage of-- if we don't have a T&E policy, then everyone's going to stay at Ritz-Carlton's and then drink 500 bottles of wine, and that ties into trust. And so being vulnerable and trusting people-- because I'd say, in the workplace, what really drives people to either leave or frustrates them is not trusted by individuals or the organization. And it takes a leader to be vulnerable. So we've never had a vacation policy-- almost 70 or 80 people. We've never had a T&E policy. So it's really like, take the time you need, and we're not going to judge you, obviously, and haven't in 18 years, and just stand-- we want you to stay in a nice hotel. We want you to have a nice dinner. You're on

the road. And just be treated like it's your own money. And we've never had to look at an expense report or scold anyone or anything. And people feel trusted. But that literally means you have to feel like someone's going to take advantage of you. And a lot of people can't do that because they're like, well, they're going to take advantage of me. I could never do that. Well, then you're going to limit your leadership skills. You're going to limit how much you can rise. You're going to limit how much people can rise. And so being vulnerable to me is the number one emotional leadership trait that allows you to go in places that most a lot of people can't go.

BELINDA PRUYNE: Yeah, as I'm hearing all of this, again, during my dutiful research, I came across where you were talking about the workplace is-- I forget how you word it, but extremely important, so make it nice. And listening to the culture of the company that you've created-- wow. I mean, hits that right on the nail. But where did that come from?

GUI COSTIN: So just growing up with a mother, as a decorator, I was always redecorating my own room. I ended up marrying a decorator, ironically, my wife. So very successful. So I've been limited in my ability to decorate to, like, the workout room. But we have the office, where I can be my Petri dish, if you will. And I always wanted to create just really cool work environments to almost be like a hotel lobby, because I feel like, when you're at a hotel, people love to go in the lobby, go on their laptop, read, whatever it might be, ambient lighting, warm-feeling couches, whatever that might be, coffee tables. And so we wanted to create an office that represented that, didn't have your classic office feel. And I just feel that if you want people to do extraordinary things and have an extraordinary our experience, then you have to create an extraordinary environment, and you have to have-- the details really

matter-- the lighting, the wood, the carpet, the desks. And you want everything, to me, to be different and unique. And then people come in. They're like, wow, this is so different. And then they feel, wow, he really has our back. And then that's going to be reflected in how they treat the customers, how they treat each other, how they treat the product because it's like, no, no, we don't do that way at Dakota. We're all about design. And it's just fun. That's another topic of the book is going to be - the new book is going to be fun. It's going to be a chapter where you have to have fun at work. Doesn't mean you're going to sacrifice performance in any way, shape, or form. You have to have fun.

BELINDA PRUYNE: Fun is one of my biggest core nonnegotiable values. If it's fun, I don't want to eat or wear it, drive it, partner with it, I don't. Life is too short. So I'm loving you big time. And I just want everybody to know who's listening, yeah, his email is going to be in the show notes. So if you want to go work for him, you know, chuck it. No, seriously, there's not a lot of people that come on that I get to interact with in my day to day that understand the depth and the importance of just what you were talking about, from the actual physical environment to the level of trust and respect you have created within your organization. It's exceptional. It really is.

GUI COSTIN: Well, thanks. And in all fairness, it's definitely a work in progress. It hasn't been a straight line, and I'm not perfect, and you have your different moments, and just making sure that you have an intense level of compassion for everyone. And then you have to have-- you absolutely have to have tough conversations and confront certain situations. That's where we have a big distinguishing characteristic between being nice and kind. We want to be kind because what we don't want to let people down. And you can be so nice to someone, you can let them down, or you might not have to have the difficult

conversations. And it's in their best interest. And it's not here to judge. It's here to grow. Everything's a coaching moment.

BELINDA PRUYNE: That's a beautiful distinction, being kind versus being nice. Because if you're just focused on being nice, you'll make decisions to make that person happy as opposed to the business decisions that you need to make. So everybody has a job kind of a deal, but also the way you interact.

GUI COSTIN: Yeah, sometimes being nice is not in their best interest. But you're actually doing them a disservice.

BELINDA PRUYNE: It's so powerful. You got some mic drop moments going on here. Honestly, that is such a clear distinction. I'm loving it. But I know that we only have so much time together. So what's the one thing you want people to walk away with today?

GUI COSTIN: So 57 years old, having 18 years in our own company, I really would say-- I'm going to come back to this-- is it's be kind. And what that really translates into is culture, in my opinion, is how you treat people. And if you're a leader listening to this, just be thoughtful about the words you use with your teammates, your employees, whatever it might be, and whatever organization that you're part of. Because it's very easy to give yourself permission to say whatever you want that comes into your brain. Limit the permission and really think about, is that always in their in their best interest? And I'm not perfect in any way, shape or form. In fact, when we write this book, we're going to have some embarrassing, but I am going to be very frank about some of the moments that I had that I'm absolutely embarrassed about and not proud of. But it's how we learned. No one died from it, but it's how we learn and grow. And hopefully, now, it's benefited everyone at our

organization. But like I said, in no way, shape, or form am I perfect, or any of us are, but we're aspiring to be and have this level of kindness while still be super, super hard charging. And then I always believe, in addition to being kind, make it about everybody else. Help other people get what they want out of life. And that's the true joy is if you're helping other people get what they want out of life and living that every day, it's the most fulfilling thing.

BELINDA PRUYNE: Good heavens. I may change careers. I'm not sure, but I think I might be one of the people--

GUI COSTIN: You're in.

BELINDA PRUYNE: Oh my lord. Well, and it made me realize real quickly, we didn't touch yet on tell everybody what you do, the basis of your company.

GUI COSTIN: So we have two businesses, and one is that we're hired by investment firms to help raise capital for their investment funds. So we're salespeople calling on investors all across the country, showing them investments of people that we work with, professional investors. So it's a sales role, a sales company, very dynamic because, as you know, just look at the world today with so much going on. The space technology, AI-- I mean, it's just crazy what everybody's doing. And so there's abundant investment opportunities. And that's been a lot of fun. We have some great partners. We started that in 2006. And over the course of the years of building that, we built a database of investors across the country, institutional investors, not individuals, not high-net worth individuals. And what we did is we took that database, and we turned it into a product in 2019. We commercialized it, and now we have over 1,200 investment firms as subscribers. We have about 5,500

salespeople and about 65 teammates at Dakota that support that product, helping people raise capital for their investment funds. So we've become kind of the Levi's and the picks and the axes for the fund raisers.

BELINDA PRUYNE: I love it. So now, I mean, I had to do that one because I want people to know, but two, I want to make sure you're getting the right candidates coming to work-- saying they want to work for you.

GUI COSTIN: Love that. Thank you.

BELINDA PRUYNE: Oh my gosh, really, truly I am so excited to share your story, really.

GUI COSTIN: I can't thank you enough.

BELINDA PRUYNE: Well, but before we go I have five rapid-fire questions. You up?

GUI COSTIN: I'm up for it.

BELINDA PRUYNE: All right, what surprised you most about yourself on your journey to achieve all that you have?

GUI COSTIN: Very simply, that I had the ability to lead others. I didn't know if I could.

BELINDA PRUYNE: Very cool. What advice would you give your younger self if you could roll back time?

GUI COSTIN: Oh my goodness, that's a long list. Advice I give to my younger self would be, earlier on, thinking more about other people and helping them get what they want.

BELINDA PRUYNE: Isn't it wonderful that, when you do that, the boomerang effect that's there for all is--

GUI COSTIN: If you do it authentically, 100%, right? If you truly do want to help-- there's a lot of young kids that are doing it, that are good teammates, which is-- so people are doing it, which is pretty cool.

BELINDA PRUYNE: Well, I mean, look at you with Worthy Events way back in the day. You just were like, you saw a problem. You're like, OK, let's make it happen. I love it. What do you do for fun?

GUI COSTIN: Well, I mean, I love to exercise, I love to go on hikes, I love to walk, I love to play a little golf and to be outside. And I love the whole concept of exercising and relaxing.

BELINDA PRUYNE: Very cool. What life lesson are you most grateful for?

GUI COSTIN: Boy, you're kind of giving me my guiding light, and it really comes back to people, and it's just how you treat people and just being thoughtful. How about this? You have a beautiful smile. You have a beautiful persona. When you walk through an airport and you meet someone eye to eye, and you just smile, and they smile back-- if you're a coffee drinker and you go to a coffee shop, and you smile at your barista, and you make their day, not just being in a hurry. Those little things, when you think about life lessons, it's just sharing the positive energy, if you will. And just we're all running around, we're all doing

stuff, but smiling, saying hello, asking somebody how their Thanksgiving was, those, to me, are kind of the beautiful life lessons of just, again, it comes back to this concept of kindness.

BELINDA PRUYNE: I'm loving this even more. I don't know if you have one, but if you do, what's your mantra?

GUI COSTIN: My mantra? Well, there's a lot of them. But I would say, when it comes down to all this, focus on what matters most. To focus on what matters most. And I think, in any endeavor, anything that we're attacking, no matter what it is, it could be people, whatever it might be, be kind is the matter most. I think that that solves so many problems when you can isolate in, so focus on what matters most.

BELINDA PRUYNE: I love it. OK, now, before I say goodbye, I know you have a book that's coming out in the first quarter of the next year. I want everybody to know all the links for his books, *The Millennials Are Not Aliens*, which I just love, but tell us a little bit about *The Dakota Way*.

GUI COSTIN: Sure. The Dakota Way is our four core principles of sales and how you raise money. And think of it as just as a circle. The core principle, number one, is at the top, and it kind of goes to 115, 130, 145, and then it repeats. These are time-tested principles. They're not easy. They're maybe not so not commonsensical. But when applied, you have extreme success, and we apply it to our domain, if you will, and our niche of investment sales. But it really can apply to almost any sales role. And I think of it as the rocks and the stones that give you the foundational elements in the jar. And then you, as an individual, are the sand that fills in all the nooks and crannies.

BELINDA PRUYNE: I love it. I look forward to that book coming out. And again, all the ways to get access to these are in the show notes. So thank you, Gui, for coming and being so open to share with everybody. I really appreciate it.

GUI COSTIN: All right, well, thank you very much for having me. I loved it.

BELINDA PRUYNE: You're welcome. OK, everybody, all the ways to connect with Gui are in the show notes. While you're there, hit Subscribe, and that way, you'll know when the next episode comes out. Until now and then, I'm going to take Gui's word here-- be kind to you and to others.

GUI COSTIN: Thanks. You were awesome. Really appreciate it. Boy, you have amazing energy.