

00:00:00:00 - 00:00:38:00

Reeta

No matter how or what time frame we set to the world along, we just know that there has to be continuity and that there is time that's required for change to take shape and to and for momentum to build, which sustains change and evolution.

00:00:38:02 - 00:01:07:21

Ann

Hello and welcome to Transcending Boundaries. I'm Ann Cotton, and today I have the honor to interview Reeta Roy, the President and CEO of the Mastercard Foundation. This episode is a special moment. Over the course of this journey. We've had the privilege of hearing unfiltered, deeply personal stories from remarkable leaders whose work has left a profound impact on societies around the world.

00:01:07:23 - 00:01:43:14

Ann

Their insights, struggles, and triumphs have reminded us that true leadership is about breaking barriers. Daring to dream big and creating lasting change. Reeta Roy's leadership embodies all of these ambitions. She has dedicated her career to transforming lives through education, economic inclusion and global health. Her work is nothing short of revolutionary. She has mobilized one of the most ambitious philanthropic efforts in Africa and in Canada.

00:01:43:15 - 00:02:18:07

Ann

Reeta has led the Mastercard Foundation with vision, humility and an unshakable belief in the power of collaboration. Under her leadership, millions of young people across Africa now have dignified and fulfilling employment. In Canada, the Foundation also enables meaningful work for young people from indigenous communities. Through its partners, the Foundation's programs have equipped more than 55 million young people with work, enabling skills and tools.

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Ann

These programs have supported close to 19 million entrepreneurs, and enabled close to 15 million young people to access work. It has committed more than \$10 billion to its programs in Africa and Canada. From the outset, Reeta has demonstrated her willingness to make bold choices by focusing the

foundation's work in Africa. She spent time learning from African entrepreneurs, educators, young people and communities, and her hands on approach forged many long term partnerships.

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Ann

She has elevated the views and agency of young people who are most often excluded from education and financial services. Their input has shaped the design of many of the Foundation's programs, and her powerful advocacy and thought leadership elevates the voices of young people and continues to influence the perspective of development institutions. And to ensure Africa received its share of global vaccines during the Covid 19 pandemic, Reeta and her team led an unprecedented \$1.5 billion program with the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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Ann

Known as the Saving Lives and Livelihoods Initiative. It trained, equipped and deployed 40,000 health workers, boosting adult vaccination rates from 3 to 53%. In Africa, the Foundation is now helping to develop a skilled workforce for vaccine manufacturing. In Canada, in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's calls to action, the Foundation launched partnerships to support indigenous youths through post-secondary education and into meaningful work.

00:04:10:18 - 00:04:23:06

Ann

All of these initiatives have helped to shape the Foundation's values of humility, listening, co-creation, kindness, respect and impact.

00:04:23:08 - 00:04:53:04

Ann

Reeta Roy's journey from the United Nations to corporate leadership and the helm of one of the world's largest philanthropies has been guided by deep listening, bold action, and an unwavering commitment to equity. A true global leader, she holds 11 honorary doctorates, serves on prestigious advisory boards, and is a force for inclusion and impact. She's a changemaker, a thought leader, and someone I deeply admire.

00:04:53:06 - 00:04:56:06

Reeta

Thank you. Thank you so much.

00:04:56:08 - 00:04:58:03

Ann

So shall we start at the beginning?

00:04:58:05 - 00:05:00:15

Reeta

That's a good place to start.

00:05:00:17 - 00:05:03:16

Ann

Tell us about your childhood.

00:05:03:16 - 00:05:33:18

Reeta

As you know, I grew up in Malaysia, and my mum and dad, came as immigrants before independence. My mother was a nurse. She trained as a nurse. My dad was a doctor, trained in public health in Kolkata from India. And my mother came from Thailand, from southern Thailand, Chinese background. But, it was her childhood, which had lots of people coming in and going out of the house all the time.

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Reeta

Different languages. My parents, especially my mother, believed that, we could decide what our faith would be. At some point when we were old enough. And Malaysia, as you know, it's a multicultural country. And so the different faiths which are practiced. And she said, look, the most important thing you've got to practice is respect. You can make your choice later.

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Reeta

But for now, practice respect. It was you know, we didn't have much, but we prized, you know, the time together. My mother was big in terms of education. She's a real advocate for education, largely because she didn't get the education she so desired as a young girl. And the childhood was a time in a country where, you know, they were conventional roles for girls and boys.

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Reeta

But mum always said, you can be anything, anything you want to be. You just are going to have to work really, really hard. And so it was a childhood which was filled with different ideas over time. I went to a very strict girls Catholic school. And so were we learned discipline fast. Had to wear a uniform every day, which I really didn't like.

00:07:10:22 - 00:07:39:15

Reeta

But now when I look back at that, I realize it was enabling kids from all walks of life, every family to come into, a schoolhouse and to be equal. Yeah. Regardless of your status. Yes. Yeah. In society, I learned a lot about that. I was always the one talking too much in class and always got punished, of-course , you know, talking when I wasn't supposed to be talking.

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Reeta

But one thing I do remember very vividly growing up was, going with my mum, whether we were doing the household shopping, you know, walking in different places and our conversations, she had a way about her, about giving me perspective on things, encouraging me. My father, is someone who was always very busy. So he wasn't always present until the time, he fell ill, and he died four years later.

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Reeta

I think I was just shy of turning 15. And that is really when I feel life changed. And I grew up really fast. I grew up really fast. But, I owe so much to my mom. She was just such a pillar, such a, towering force in terms of strength and determination. And she was that way all the way till she died.

00:08:47:00 - 00:08:49:00

Reeta

And she was almost 90.

00:08:49:02 - 00:09:08:13

Ann

She sounds very remarkable. Woman. Yeah. So this respect that she talked about. How did she display that in her everyday life? Because it's one thing to tell a child to give a child a message. But it's another thing, isn't it, to practice that so that you learn by example.

00:09:08:15 - 00:09:37:18

Reeta

I saw it every day with mom. You know, even though we had modest means, we did have people who helped us in the house keep the house clean, and, my mom would always say always. And she would expect us to actually help them, so that we would learn how to clean our rooms, to treat them as if they were a member of the family.

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Reeta

I saw mom many times, you know, reach into her pocket, but we could be anywhere. Anywhere. And there was someone in need. Usually a woman. And she was right there and she would and I would say; how do you know they're going to use the money for whatever it is you've given them the money for.

00:09:59:19 - 00:10:29:21

Reeta

She would say; how they use the money. It's not our business. They just looked like they needed a little bit of help today. Yeah. And this is something we can do. Mum had. I remember when my father died. There were many people in our household. My father was a Hindu, and so there were many rites to be observed.

00:10:29:23 - 00:10:38:13

Reeta

Not just for the day, but for the next 30 days. And mum told the priest who came.

00:10:38:15 - 00:11:05:01

Reeta

Tell me what I must do, and I will observe, and I will observe these rights. She had a way. I remember when my brother left home and he had school friends who would still come to the house, and they had different challenges. I don't know whether they were schoolboy challenges or whether they were serious challenges, but they were challenges.

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Reeta

And mum listened. Mum listened. And so she just demonstrated in so many different ways what it meant, what it meant to be, what it meant to care for others, what it meant to listen, listen to other people. So I must have just imbibed that somehow.

00:11:30:08 - 00:11:48:09

Ann

Yes, through a process of osmosis and example. And she valued education very highly and taught you because of her own denial of education, not having as much education as she would have wanted. And so you've said to me in the past, you were good at exams.

00:11:48:11 - 00:11:49:06

Reeta

00:11:49:07 - 00:11:52:11

Ann

One is any good at exams for a reason.

00:11:52:15 - 00:12:05:11

Ann

So, you know, when you were working hard in your Catholic school, how did you, how did you achieve what you did at a very early stage and in your life and your adolescence?

00:12:05:13 - 00:12:34:17

Reeta

You know, I was growing up at a time when the country was changing. And, looking back, I understand a lot more. And I've probably more empathy for Malaysia then. But it was a time when the country was changing and the policies were going to favor, one large segment of the population or because of historical discrimination and historical exclusion in the country.

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Reeta

Though growing up I was considered not just a minority, but a double minority because I came from a multi-racial household. I couldn't tick the box that I was one group or another. I had to tick a box which said other, and that meant the opportunities to go to school. Opportunities for scholarships, opportunities to go to university were limited.

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Reeta

That the competition would be all that more fierce for the fewer seats in school that were allocated. And so I knew and my mother knew that I wouldn't stay forever in Malaysia. And she wanted me to have an education somewhere, somewhere else outside the country. And so as a result, I would remember in a studying obviously during the day, but at night studying the same subjects, but in English, but in English.

00:13:35:02 - 00:14:01:00

Reeta

I still remember mum providing me coffee at, 8 or 9:00 at night, a cup of coffee so I could keep going on my studies. And when I had that opportunity to come to the United States to live with a family, for my last two years of high school, I remember my mum saying this first step I can pay for.

00:14:01:01 - 00:14:12:02

Reeta

I can pay for the ticket to leave. I can pay for some of your pocket money.

00:14:12:04 - 00:14:29:06

Reeta

But after that, you're going to have to find your way, and you're going to have to be. You're going to have to work hard. Gonna have to grow up fast. So when I think back, I think back that my first scholarship was my mum's scholarship. It was her scholarship. That's wonderful. Yeah.

00:14:29:12 - 00:14:55:01

Ann

That's really, that's that's wonderful. Your mum's scholarship. It must have been hard for her though, emotionally to say: My child, my daughter, is going to have to leave. Going to have to leave me. And, Yet she had the love, generosity, to enable you to do that rather than holding on to you and trying to keep you close.

00:14:55:03 - 00:14:59:05

Ann

That was an act of huge love and generosity, wasn't it?

00:14:59:07 - 00:15:01:03

Reeta

Was an act of unconditional love.

00:15:01:07 - 00:15:26:23

Ann

But you, you know, leaving, going to the United States, that was that was also a massive leap for you. And you have taken many leaps in your life. And that was that was a very big one. And what about the influences? Some of the, your mother, of course. And who else has influenced you greatly? You know, in the start of your career in the United States.

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Reeta

Certainly there were many people along the way. The American family I lived with, they are in their 80s now. Still, my American mum and dad who I'm in touch with. Professors at school, where I went to beautiful, small, intimate, private, Presbyterian College. And I was there on a full ride in terms of scholarship.

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Reeta

And people looked out for me. But when I started working, when I started my working career, it was my first job in a corporation in a multinational in New York. The woman who made that possible, who offered me the role, Margaret Marshak. She had an incredible impact on me. It was the first time I'd actually come into that kind of environment.

00:16:18:03 - 00:16:52:08

Reeta

It was very conservative, very proper. You dressed in a particular way? You behaved in a particular way. And here was, Margaret. Full of humor. Told funny stories, some of it irreverent, which cannot be repeated here. She was joyful, whip smart, whip smart. And we went to many meetings together, and she would just say, when you walk in, sit down and just listen.

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Reeta

Just listen. I was the note taker and all these meetings. But she would say, listen, watch. And we can discuss after what you understood and what you saw. And so early on we prized listening and that opened up the door to understanding. Margaret was also one of those people who she just wasn't afraid to be herself. She'd grown up in a small town in Michigan.

00:17:23:06 - 00:17:51:04

Reeta

Her father worked, on the on the line making cars. They were immigrants, from Czechoslovakia. And so it was a life which I learned a lot about. I never met her parents, but I learned a lot about them. Learnt a lot about her brother. And growing up in a small town with aspirations at a time when they weren't as many opportunities for young girls.

00:17:51:06 - 00:18:34:08

Reeta

And she pierced many glass ceilings, she broke through. I didn't even fully understand how remarkable she was until years later. And I thought what she endured, how she persevered. But she had that sense, that great intuition, that high degree of emotional intelligence, how to connect with people, how to

make them comfortable around her. And I imagine in the early days they're mostly men, as of course, and who then became her greatest champions and really advanced her career.

00:18:34:14 - 00:18:35:15

Reeta

Marvelous. Yeah.

00:18:35:16 - 00:18:55:04

Ann

Marvelous. Yes. She sounds also wonderful, a wonderful woman, too. But her intuition was always telling her something about you. That you was somebody that it was worth investing in. Somebody that she wanted to mentor. And teach. Did you maintain that relationship?

00:18:55:10 - 00:19:19:20

Reeta

Absolutely. So we still have a relationship today. In fact, when I was interviewing for this role at the Mastercard Foundation and here I am, you know, preparing for this big interview with the full board worried, and the phone rings and it's Margaret and it's Margaret, and she says so what's your opening line going to be? I said, my opening line.

00:19:19:20 - 00:19:54:12

Reeta

What's that? She said, what you're going to say when you get in there, what are you going to say? And Reeta, most importantly, what are you going to wear? And then she said, don't wear that gray suit. And she was just so human, so relatable, so relatable. She, was someone who told me early on when I was still working with her, and I was working so hard, I would put in hours, hours preparing her briefs, taking down those notes, doing all the research.

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Reeta

One day she passed by my office and she said, are you going home? I said, well, I've just got a little bit more to finish, just a little bit more. And I never forget that line. And she said, Reeta, I'm going to tell you something and you please take it as I intended, try to become an interesting person.

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Reeta

Don't just walk. Don't just work. And that just opened up books, music, art, culture, travel, being curious about other people's stories. And, so periodically I think about that. I think about that line, try to become an interesting person. Yes, people will want to be around you.

00:20:40:05 - 00:20:51:19

Ann

Yes, yes. Well, I'm sure you did indeed take that to heart and are indeed an interesting person. And, what does she what does she think about you today?

00:20:51:21 - 00:21:22:14

Reeta

You know, when I told her about this world and I told her, and over the years, I've gotten to see her for mentoring sessions and talked about the people I've met, the things I've been learning about, places I've been to. She would just always ask questions. Questions about what I was perceiving, what I understood. I mean, she, of course, thought that this work was astonishing and incredibly important.

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Reeta

But in all of that, she would really cut through and ask, what are you learning? What are you learning about this journey? What are you learning about yourself? What are you learning about? Who are you becoming? And once she came to visit at the office in Toronto and she had been volunteering and here she was, she might have been 72 years old at that time.

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Reeta

And she came to tell me about a fabulous internship. I said, what kind of internship? And she said, Reeta, it's going to be at the Vatican. I'm going to be working for the Jesuit Refugee Service. I remember being absolutely blown away. Blown away that she was embarking on something brand new. She wanted to learn more. And then she said, and now I have a question to ask you, what are you and what is your Foundation doing for refugees?

00:22:29:04 - 00:22:33:04

Ann

That's a nice question, but you haven't answered my question.

00:22:33:04 - 00:22:35:08

Reeta

Oh dear. Have I evaded your question?

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Ann

My question was, does she think about you, though? You've told us more about Margaret and how remarkable she is and the impact she had in your life. But you haven't. You haven't told us what she thinks about you now.

00:22:50:14 - 00:23:21:19

Reeta

I'd like to think that, Margaret, and you'll have to interview at some time. But, I'd like to think that she's proud. That she's proud of, the young girl she took a bet on didn't turn out too badly, that she's proud that I still quote her father. Her father, who was the one who told her Margaret, try to make new mistakes.

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Reeta

And she used that on me. And I've used that many times with other young people. Yes. And try to remember that myself. I hope she's proud that,

00:23:35:18 - 00:24:03:04

Reeta

I listen. I listen, and I've never stopped. And that's how I, I see being a lifelong learner is such, my goodness, such a privilege. The ability to learn forever, and to enrich your mind and expand your, your

ideas. Yeah. So she had it. She had a huge impact. Yeah. I remember once my mother coming to visit Margaret, and she.

00:24:03:04 - 00:24:33:10

Reeta

My mother came into this office. Margaret came by, and mum met her, and Margaret left, you know, went back to work after saying hello. And mum said to me, Margaret controls you. And I remember thinking, being so shocked, what do you mean controls me? And she said, she controls you through love and I thought about that. I said, you're absolutely as always, mom.

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Reeta

You're right. She is who she is. And I want to make her proud. And that's the kind of leader. That's the kind of leader I want to follow. Somebody who's kind, who sees me, who creates space. Space for growth. Space to contribute.

00:24:52:02 - 00:25:08:02

Ann

Yes, yes. Well, I think she knew that you were pretty said that. And, and she in those early days. But somebody else who you said took a bet on you. And I think he knew too, that it was a safe bet. Your remarkable late husband Jim.

00:25:08:02 - 00:25:09:00

Reeta

Yes.

00:25:09:02 - 00:25:12:01

Ann

How was how did he inspire and support you.

00:25:12:03 - 00:25:37:13

Reeta

You know, Jimmy came for a at a time of my life at an unexpected meeting. I had gone to a workshop on model UN, and he ran it. And that's how I met him at Barnard College on a weekend. And it seemed like he wrote to me every single day. And three months later, there wasn't really that much to do with the email at the time.

00:25:37:13 - 00:25:56:11

Reeta

But he wrote to me every single day. And three months later, we were standing in front of 96 Summit Street in Brooklyn, and we're going to move into an apartment together. And I remember my mother saying, you're nuts. I sent you to school to become smart, not to do something completely reckless. And you still are going to go to school.

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Reeta

You still going to go to grad school? And I said, of course I am. That was an extraordinary partnership with Jim until he died. He, taught me so much about supporting someone else. You love creating space. I remember when we wrote our wedding vows, which I'm sure a few people thought was a really bad idea.

00:26:26:14 - 00:26:52:16

Reeta

But one of the lines in the in the vows for each other was a promise to help the other person pursue their dreams. And so when I think about my career and the ability that we had to go live in different places, we moved to Shanghai and we were there for three years. Jim gave up his job and said, I'm going to just follow you.

00:26:52:17 - 00:27:14:15

Reeta

I'll do something else. I'll reinvent myself, which he did. And, and we struck out. Yeah, and in a big way. But that was what it was all about. And, and I think about the biggest gift is he really taught me how to love people.

00:27:14:17 - 00:27:26:01

Ann

Yes. Yes, indeed. And I had the privilege of meeting him. And I saw his humor, his lack of pretentiousness, because he was about only about 16in taller than.

00:27:26:04 - 00:27:29:04

Reeta

Just about, you know, maybe 20in taller.

00:27:29:06 - 00:27:41:06

Ann

And of course, he was Irishman and Irish American. And, you stayed in touch, close touch with his Irish family. Well, what is it about the Irish in Ireland that you love?

00:27:41:10 - 00:28:17:07

Reeta

Oh, my gosh. I remember my first visit to Ireland in, it might have been 1997 or 98 and we went to Cavan, County Cavan, which is where the Muldoon sailed from, to Kings Court. And we met his uncles, our grand uncles, rather his grand uncles. And I remember the hospitality. It's just a modest home. But the hospitality. There were four kinds of potato dishes, lots of sandwiches and a huge amount of laughter and storytelling.

00:28:17:09 - 00:28:43:21

Reeta

And I love the way they just took me in right away. Yeah. We opened they opened the door, and it was as if I walked straight into an embrace. They were stories, and Jim was a big one for organizing the reunions across different continents. And whenever the Muldoon's came from Ireland, whenever they came to visit, or when they came to for these reunions, there'd be a lot of song, a lot of singing.

00:28:43:23 - 00:29:26:09

Reeta

We did one reunion together with a branch of the family that had moved to New Zealand, and I remember so well, you know, here, first of all, they were about my height, which was really helpful. So we could really communicate well and, we were in front of this beautiful, I don't know what you call it, a longhouse, but it is the traditional house of the Maori because generations of that family had

intermarried, Irish and Maori had had intermarried, and one of the customs of entering the house was that the visitors would sing and we could sing any song we wished.

00:29:26:11 - 00:29:52:16

Reeta

And so there was a little bit of a conference amongst us, myself included, and we decided that we would sing Danny Boy in this Maori home. And, I that's something about the human connection of people who love their history, love to tell stories, who love a drink, and who love good jokes. And there was so much of Jimmy in them.

00:29:52:18 - 00:30:12:02

Ann

Yes. So much. Yes, yes, yes. And of course, he was a big part of your decision, to move from the corporate sector. Yes. And to be the head of a not-for-profit. That's a that's another leap that you made. And how did that come about?

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Reeta

You know, I've been working for about six years. By that time I had, at this corporation called Abbott. I'd come to set up, a function, which we didn't know what we were to call it. We had about calling it global citizenship and policy. And not too long after that, the CEO asked me to take on the Foundation, which was called the Fund, and to, reform, reinvent, revitalize that organization.

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Reeta

So it'd be much more in line with the priorities for the organization. So I did that. I learned an incredible amount of work, incredible hard work. And I learned a lot in that process. But at some point, there was a restlessness. And I remember having a conversation with Jimmy and saying, you know, I think it's time. It's time for something new, something different.

00:31:09:01 - 00:31:34:09

Reeta

And I remember one of the things he said, are you sure? He said, you've just put so much into this, so much. Don't you just want to sit back, put just a little bit and enjoy it? And I said, you know, I'm not built like that. I'm not built like that at all. And, I've got to think about what I will do next.

00:31:34:11 - 00:31:58:02

Reeta

And that very week. And it was almost as if the thought was clear in my mind. And within that week, someone I had worked with called me, and we had worked together at the Fund, and she said, you know, a headhunter called me, there's this foundation called the Mastercard Foundation, which I'd never heard of, and they're looking for a CEO.

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Reeta

Can I give your name? And so, of course, I went home and I report it to Jim. And he said, you know, it's a good as any chance for you to start interviewing again. You haven't interviewed before for a long time. Why don't you say yes? And I did, and one thing led to the other, and I was fortunate enough to be offered the role.

00:32:18:18 - 00:32:41:23

Ann

I think they were very fortunate. Yeah. And of course, the Foundation then maybe you hadn't heard of them because it was a very different. Yes. Foundation from the Foundation it is now. Of course, it was, started with a 500 million, gift of shares and, you know, the, your capacity to spend your the amount of money you had to spend.

00:32:41:23 - 00:33:18:09

Ann

That sounds like quite a lot, but nothing compared to today where, there was a 50 billion U.S. dollar, now, of that early investment and somehow you have stayed the course. So the Foundation you joined in the Foundation as it exists now, are very different. And it's quite unusual, I think, for people to stay on that journey, to be able to stay on the journey, you have not only evolved the organization, but you must have evolved yourself.

00:33:18:11 - 00:33:23:12

Ann

What are some of the challenges you faced in growing it?

00:33:23:14 - 00:33:52:00

Reeta

You know, in the early days, and I didn't think it was that simple either. But in the early days, clearly, in retrospect, it was simpler. We were a smaller organization. We had more modest goals in terms of how much we had to disperse, partnerships we had to form. But with each year passing and the assets growing, it gave us license.

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Reeta

License to imagine what kind of impact we could create and what kind of impact we could enable working with other organizations and so I would say that at every turn it was about learning, learning a new. Meeting different people, different ideas. And there were many partners who we started with, who also grew with us. And so when I think about it, I'd like to think that I grew with the foundation, even as the foundation was growing with the times and we were growing with many partners.

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Reeta

And I look back at that journey, it all comes down to being willing to listen. We're willing to learn to challenge yourself and to surround yourself with the right sets of people. People who joined us as employees or people who joined us as partners on this journey.

00:34:48:09 - 00:35:21:07

Ann

And of course, you have, almost 600 members of staff now. And, and yet, it seems that the culture that was you began you, you, you built from the outset that has remained solid, that hasn't changed. The values have remained consistent. And that's very hard to do from moving from an organization, a Foundation that has ten members of staff to almost 600 to keep those values.

00:35:21:09 - 00:35:26:17

Ann

How have you done that? And what are these values that are so important to you and to the Foundation?

00:35:26:19 - 00:35:58:21

Reeta

Well, I'll start by saying that the values we didn't start out by stating these are going to be our values. We began our work, and 3 or 4 years into this journey, we took stock of how we were doing. We were getting a lot of feedback from partners, and sometimes they would say, you work in a very different way, or it's a very unusual, distinct experience working with the Mastercard Foundation.

00:35:58:21 - 00:36:32:22

Reeta

And we would ask how? And they would say things like, you actually listen to us, you pay attention when we provide feedback, you don't tell us what to do, but you collaborate and we co-design together. And so it was those early years where as employees, maybe there were about 50 of us at that time where we said, it's time to write down these values so that others joining us later on, we'll know what's important to us.

00:36:33:02 - 00:37:13:16

Reeta

Yes. And so those values of humility, of listening, co-creation, kindness and respect and impact came from the journey, came from within. But it came from feedback working with our partners. And the values I hope will continue to always guide the Foundation. You know, in terms of scaling these values or somehow finding ways to impart values. I think it's very difficult to do it just by exhorting others; they have to experience it themselves.

00:37:13:18 - 00:37:38:06

Reeta

But most importantly, they have to already have an affinity with this way of working. And so when you look across the Foundation and you look across the people who are there, they come from all walks of life, all sectors, many of them have also walked the journey of young people. Many of them, like myself, have been beneficiaries of scholarships.

00:37:38:07 - 00:38:11:05

Reeta

Someone else's generosity, have experienced a fast growing up, a fast growing up. And so through somehow through all of this, there's a connection. There's a connection to what this work is all about, its purpose, the mission, and also the way we wish to work with each other and I think you can only scale if that's the right term, even scale that experience.

00:38:11:05 - 00:38:18:01

Reeta

So that understanding of the values through people, through others who already embody that spirit.

00:38:18:02 - 00:38:36:19

Ann

Yes, yes, yes. Well, I can certainly endorse that sense that, you were different because, what organizations and partners were telling you? Because that was my experience, when I first met you, in that very unprepossessing couple.

00:38:36:21 - 00:38:38:14

Reeta

New York City, very dark.

00:38:38:14 - 00:39:06:13

Ann

I remember, very dark. But it felt so alive. And what struck me was your your hunger to understand your deep curiosity and your ability to listen, that you've spoken about the importance of listening. I think you bring a quality of listening that's different. I think you listen in a deep way just to what is being said, but how it is being said.

00:39:06:15 - 00:39:51:06

Ann

Who is being chosen to say it? What manner of things that you, you listen to. And that's reflected in the language you use. You know, you use different language. You use language, respect and kindness. Like Margaret. You are not afraid to use the word love. And it was that difference is very marked. So what do

you think the impact has been on, on young people in particular of, of you behaving in that way because you, you get close, you get close to people you enjoy getting close to people.

00:39:51:08 - 00:39:54:03

Reeta

Wow.

00:39:54:05 - 00:40:47:16

Reeta

Well, I hope several things happen. I hope that, the Foundation I hope that I, when I engage with people, create an environment where they feel comfortable just being themselves. That they know that, they have stories within them that I'd like to hear. Others would like to hear that they, empowered in some fashion to speak, to share, to communicate, to express a worldview, to instruct, even organizations like ourselves, which need to take some instruction about what's real and what matters to them.

00:40:47:18 - 00:41:24:21

Reeta

I hope that listening, it's not just with your ears and with your eyes, but it's listening with your every being. I remember, visiting a place called Turkana in Kenya. I had gone to visit, a cohort of young people who were on scholarship funded by the Foundation with a program called Wings to Fly. And in this part of the country, it was arid, landscape looked almost inhospitable to vegetation.

00:41:24:23 - 00:41:56:03

Reeta

And I was in a village meeting a young man whose name was William. And he led me to a tree, and he said, this is my bedroom. This is where I do my homework, and this is where I teach Sunday school. And just standing under this tree, listening to him, I could just see kids around him for Sunday school.

00:41:56:05 - 00:42:26:12

Reeta

And his mother lived very close by in a hut, which I think is called a manyatta. It's just for sole occupant, one person. It's a very simple structure. And she came. She didn't speak any English, but there was also a

translator with us. And she stood beside me while William was talking. And then it looked as if she looked at the sky, and she started speaking in her language.

00:42:26:14 - 00:42:58:23

Reeta

I didn't understand, of course, a word, but I just felt the emotion flood right through me as she was speaking. Then by the time the translator and the interpreter caught up, she said, William's mother is asking, or she's really saying, I don't know. I don't know who it is who is helping my son. But whoever you are, you're part of my family.

00:42:59:01 - 00:43:11:08

Reeta

And somehow, even before that translation, that emotion, that power of that connection was palpable.

00:43:11:10 - 00:43:21:11

Reeta

And so when I think about listening, it's with all your senses ready, present and focused.

00:43:21:13 - 00:43:49:23

Ann

And it's wonderful that the feeling and the poetry, in what she said. Yes. And the tribute and what she said to you and the Foundation. And you were able to close that space if you like to, to cross the bridge. To, to enable her to, to speak and to listen. And this, this is fundamentally important.

00:43:50:01 - 00:43:50:14

Reeta

To.

00:43:50:14 - 00:44:15:06

Ann

Learning, and understanding. And so when you, when you're with young people, when you're speaking to young people and you're thinking about their future, the future as entrepreneurs and leaders in different kinds of ways, what would you say to them are the most important things to look out for in their behavior, so that they too can close that space?

00:44:15:08 - 00:44:21:17

Reeta

That's a powerful question.

00:44:21:19 - 00:44:52:06

Reeta

I think one of the first things which would be important, I want to find a way to convey is for young people to take the time through many, many experiences through friendships, through their families, and when, when they leave and when they leave home to discover who they are and to discover what it is that's, important to them.

00:44:52:08 - 00:45:37:13

Reeta

That's important to them. To discover what they care about. Because that's a source of knowing, of knowing who you are. So that that's number one. Second is to thrive and have a thirst for learning. Learning that's not just in school, not learning, that's not just from books, but learning that comes from conversation with other people, comes from connecting, because that's how you develop a sense of empathy and understanding, and it opens up a whole other dimension into what it means to be a human being.

00:45:37:15 - 00:45:55:04

Reeta

I wish for young people these days in a world that's moving so fast, to find ways to slow down inside and to anchor on those things which matter most to them.

00:45:55:06 - 00:46:25:07

Ann

I'm sure they will take huge stock of that, particularly because of the immense impact you've had and the confidence you've had to use those qualities to know to learn from your mother, to learn from Margaret, all those people who've, influenced you along the way. So, you've done something huge and had an impact on millions of lives.

00:46:25:07 - 00:46:43:04

Ann

And one of the steps you took was to, move to Rwanda. So again, to, to close that space, you were working out of your office in Toronto. What prompted that? That move, that bold move.

00:46:43:06 - 00:47:23:02

Reeta

So, ten years into the work of the foundation, we had to take a moment, and reflect on everything that we had achieved and ask ourselves, were there other things we wanted to do but could not pursue for different reasons? And we had to ask ourselves, what would the next ten years look like? And that's when we embarked on this new strategy called Young Africa Works, and it's a play on words, but it really is focused on young people and their aspirations and their aspirations and their dreams.

00:47:23:04 - 00:47:55:23

Reeta

But it manifests in the ability to access employment or what we call dignified and fulfilling work. So work that not only just brings meaning and enables a young person to look after themselves or their families, but also grow and to be able to contribute. Now it's a strategy that had to be undertaken and can only be undertaken in countries, in a manner that aligns to the national aspirations of countries and where they're going.

00:47:56:01 - 00:48:26:22

Reeta

So many countries across Africa have visions of becoming middle income countries, and they're on that journey. And that means some sectors of the economy are going to be the ones which will contribute the most and will also contribute to the most in terms of opportunities for young people to find dignified work. Knowing this, understanding this, requires us to somehow close that distance between us as a Foundation.

00:48:27:00 - 00:48:35:06

Reeta

And young people and those opportunities and where those countries are headed. And so we took the decision to set up offices.

00:48:35:06 - 00:49:11:14

Reeta

Across Africa and the countries where we were going to be working, so that we could be close to our partners, close to young people, but most importantly, to become part of community so that we could have more understanding, a deeper understanding, a different sense of what's possible and who to work with. And we set for ourselves a goal of working with many, many African organizations, organizations led by young people.

00:49:11:16 - 00:49:44:20

Reeta

It's impossible to know any of this if you're thousands of miles away. And so when we made that decision, we just thought it was the absolute right thing to do. It's the right way to pursue this strategy. And so it felt incredibly natural to also move and to be there. And I feel so grateful to be in Rwanda, grateful that, I was welcomed, grateful to have found a community of women who basically took me in.

00:49:44:20 - 00:50:02:13

Reeta

Three women took me in, and now I have 90 friends because of it's their families, it's their extended families. It's their communities. And it's given me an insight into the fabric, as it were, the social fabric of these communities.

00:50:02:13 - 00:50:25:00

Ann

As you move on. As you look back and you think about your legacy and what you would like to see hold, hold into the future. What will enable the Foundation to remain strong and hope into the future.

00:50:25:02 - 00:50:52:09

Reeta

It's a great question. That's a conversation we're having a lot these days at the Foundation. I think that the foundation will continue to stay who it is, and this work will continue to endure as long as we hold on to these values. These values are the basis by which we need to make decisions, choices, particularly when the decisions are hard ones.

00:50:52:11 - 00:50:56:14

Reeta

They are the values which help us.

00:50:56:16 - 00:51:20:23

Reeta

Not take the easy road, but maybe take the road less traveled on our path. When I think about what I'm proudest off at the Foundation, proudest of this past several years, it's the people. It's the people at the organization. It's the people with whom we work. It's the young people who are in our midst, who are all around us.

00:51:21:00 - 00:51:37:21

Reeta

That's what I'm proudest off. And I'm proud that we chose to put our weight behind African organizations, indigenous organizations, so that they can lead the way.

00:51:37:23 - 00:52:14:15

Ann

And, you know, your modesty is legendary. And I think everyone, watching and listening will have seen, that modesty which is which is in you perhaps, perhaps there isn't actually a real word in English to describe it. It's the humility in the face of the challenge. But the personal modesty in not taking credit, but just for, a few moments, can you, abandon your modesty and just own some of that success

00:52:14:15 - 00:52:35:17

Ann

You've talked about people, the other people you're most proud of. What could you say? What would you like to say to those people who've really supported you on this journey that you're most proud of, of what you've done?

00:52:35:19 - 00:53:11:19

Reeta

First of all, I want to say thank you. Thank you, thank you for the opportunity. Thank you for teaching me. Thank you for schooling me. I want to say thank you. I think the thing I'm proudest of, I'm not sure the word proudest off is the right word. Yes, but the thing that gives me peace and joy is that I'm still who I am through all of this, and that if my mum were here, she wouldn't be on my case this time.

00:53:11:21 - 00:53:21:15

Reeta

She would be pleased that, I'm essentially in the same girl who left home. So many years ago.

00:53:21:17 - 00:53:52:03

Ann

That same girl who worked very hard to the leap. Yes. To the United States, who took the leap from the corporate world into a Foundation. Who took the leap to move, to Rwanda, centre the work in Africa. Who took the leap listening to a radio program to support Canada's vision for indigenous communities. She would be immensely proud.

00:53:52:04 - 00:54:21:22

Ann

Of who you are, because the authenticity is there. There is, I think, no separation in you between your personal and your professional life. The values that you bring to your personal life are the same as those values you bring to your professional life, and I think everybody watching and listening will have seen that and I hope, taken strong lessons from you, particularly young people, as they face their futures and careers.

00:54:21:23 - 00:54:24:01

Ann

Reeta Roy, thank you so much.

00:54:24:01 - 00:54:30:16

Reeta

Oh, thank you and thank you, thank you, thank you. What a joy. Thank thank you, thank you, thank you so much and a pleasure.

00:54:30:17 - 00:55:03:06

Ann

Reeta Roy's life and career exemplify the extraordinary impact that one leader can have in transforming lives, creating opportunities, and shaping a more inclusive world. As we have heard, her work is deeply personal, yet its reach spans continents, empowering millions of young people to build a future filled with possibility. From her childhood in Malaysia to a young scholarship recipient in the US, she leads one of the world's largest and most influential philanthropic organizations.

00:55:03:08 - 00:55:37:02

Ann

She has transcended so many boundaries and has transformed lives and communities by enabling educational access for millions who would not have had the opportunity. Reeta has redefined what is possible her vision, humility and bold action by championing respectful collaboration and partnerships, dismantling systemic barriers, and believing in the power of young people. She has helped build a movement that enables the millions in Africa and Canada to transcend their own boundaries.

00:55:37:04 - 00:55:45:04

Ann

She is proof that leadership with purpose can change lives and leave a legacy of impact for generations to come.