



# ALLISON BALLMER: TEACHING PEOPLE HOW TO SEE YOU

## VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

**FRANK MUELLER:** Allison, thank you so much for your time. It's a great honor talking to you and interviewing you. And reading your very exciting curriculum vitae, I want to ask a question, what has been the driving force behind your scientific career, Allison?

**ALLISON BALLMER:** I think there's probably two aspects to that. Maybe there's a driving force behind my sense of purpose and then, how I've applied that to my career. So I studied engineering and really used my undergrad to do a lot of research that was applied to helping humans. It was biomechanical, etc. And early in my career, I had the opportunity to get more involved in cancer diagnostics and that felt really important to me because right around that time, I had two family members that were diagnosed with cancer.

And I wanted to start working on things that I felt were closer to where I wanted to have a sense of impact, you know, closer to my heart. And so, a lot of my career, the driving force for me, has been oriented around how can I impact cancer patients lives? I'm not an MD, I'm not an oncologist, so how could I do this otherwise? And really trying to work on projects that are on the bleeding edge of technology and innovation and in partnership with pharma in sort of that precision medicine space. That's really been a huge source of inspiration for me.

But I think when I think about really the driving force in my career and where I really get a lot of my sense of purpose from is oriented around creating a more just and fair environment

Maybe it's cause I'm a middle child, I like fairness. It's important to me. The forgotten middle child. I'm like things need to be fair.

And so, when I studied engineering, it became really apparent to me day one as I was the only women in the classroom at such a young age. I was made keenly aware of those sort of minority experience. And maybe I hadn't had such awareness around that before, but that has become a defining aspect of how I address my career.

And since a very early time from my undergrad to my first job, to now being in the boardroom, I'm often the only woman in the room and typically, one of the younger leaders in the room. And so, having that sense of justice or fairness has really been a driving force for me, trying to create an environment that's creating more space for women and minorities and really advocating for women and minorities in the spaces that I occupy. I think that's been a real source of passion and purpose for me as I've endeavored through my career to impact cancer patients.

So, yeah, that's kind of the lens by which I see through, Frank.

**FRANK MUELLER:** Thank you so much. That's an interesting aspect, Allison. You just mentioned being a woman in a probably very male environment. I just want to pick on that, what particular challenges and/or advantages have you experienced as a woman in



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comparison to male colleagues, especially as in your leader position?

**ALLISON BALLMER:** This is such a good question and it's interesting because I remember when I was younger in my career, I would be in the room and I'd noticed that my male colleagues didn't exactly know what box to put me in or how to think of me. It was like was I their aspiring daughter, was I their work wife, like how to think of me. And I had to learn that it was an opportunity for me to teach people how to see me, to teach people how to treat me. And, hopefully, this has advanced in the last 20 years, but my experience of as being a young female engineer managing a team of all male engineers and things like that was I had the privilege of teaching people what it can mean to have a young woman in leadership or a young female peer colleague. And I think that that felt like a disadvantage. I mean I had a lot of imposter syndrome and I really have a lot of empathy for women starting out their career because when you're put in a position like I was, where I had leadership roles early on, you have a lot of visibility and it feels a little bit like there's a spotlight.

And I might not have had the sense of self-assurance or confidence to navigate that as I do today. It felt like when are they going to find out that I don't belong. But now, I think that I see what felt like a disadvantage has been a tremendous opportunity. And I really want to encourage and empower women, especially younger women in their careers to see when

they're having that minority moment, that to see that it's an opportunity.

And I think when I was around 25, I was promoted to lead a group of my peers and become kind of the head of the manufacturing and supply chain for, at the time, the world's fastest growing and largest cancer diagnostic instrumentation technology. And it was such a tremendous privilege, but I remember in that moment, I had this like defining aha moment with myself where I realized my career's going to be a big part of my life and I don't want to abandon myself to be some version of myself in the workplace because I felt kind of the stress or that imposter syndrome. I really made a very clear commitment to myself that I was going to be fully me, even if that disadvantaged my career growth or whatever. If I'm going to spend 10 hours a day, five, sometimes six days a week, deepening on the project you're working on, this was going to be my life and I wanted to live my life being fully me.

So I think the opportunity that that's created for me in my career has been, I've been able to kind of define what it looks like to be a young woman in the workplace, to be a young woman, a young leader. Maybe now, I'm less young, but to define that for other people and to play my hand and not anyone else's.

**FRANK MUELLER:** Yeah, before I come to the topic of woman in a scientific career, Allison, I want to ask you and hear about your opinion. And I picked this up in one of your publications, a comment you made about leadership is



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first and foremost an inside job. What exactly do you mean with that?

**ALLISON BALLMER:** Well, Frank, when you think about – when you reflect on your own experiences, what have been the defining moments that have really allowed you to shine? They're typically moments of adversity. There are challenges and the huge projects, something to overcome, maybe there's a power dynamic in the workplace and I have to navigate it thoughtfully. Maybe I have personal stresses in my life and I've got to stay focused here. Adversity provides a lot of clarification around who we are and how we show up. And I think that leadership is really born in adversity. And so, followership is born in these moments where we have adversity, a challenge. And I don't say adversity in a negative way, I mean really, again, adversity is a tremendous opportunity that it presents all of us.

And when I think about leadership as first and foremost an inside job, I kind of ask the question, if I don't know how to lead myself, especially through adversity, then how am I ever going to lead others?

And so, I think about the opportunity that adversity presents and it gives us an opportunity to choose. Are we going to react? Are we going to respond? And so, am I going

to be principled and predictable? Am I going to be blown to and fro or waver? Am I going to succumb to pressures? And so, I think about leadership as first and foremost an inside job

because if I don't know how to lead myself, then I'm not going to have the kind of followership that my position or influence warrants. And so, I think about it ultimately as accountability.

**FRANK MUELLER:** Leading by example probably is also included in this philosophy?

**ALLISON BALLMER:** That's right. Well, you know, it's like if I know how when I'm stressed, when I'm put under the gun and pressured and whatnot, when I know, hey, I'm going to pause and take a step back and get perspective or maybe I'm going to use some of the tools I have. You know, maybe I'll meditate or write and reflect or I'll draft the email that I don't send just to process my thoughts. When I know how to care for myself in moments of stress, in these crucible moments, then that also shows others I am a steward of this moment, I'm a steward of myself, I know how to respond and you're not going to get a reaction from me.

And I think that this is – it goes a long way. It's like when the decision doesn't go my way, how am I going to respond? When I'm caught in someone else's power dynamic, how am I going to respond? And I think that the more senior you get in your career, the more your influence is dictated by how you show up versus what you know.

And so, I really can't stress enough, we are really accountable for being the best stewards of us, ourselves. And when we steward ourselves and when we take care of ourselves

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and even when we know how to pause and reflect or take a step back or tend to our own needs, that's leadership and that's modeling for the people who are watching or the people who you're accountable for. That's modeling to them how they can also respond versus react.

**FRANK MUELLER:** Okay. When you talked about your enceinte, your own scientific career and you covered the – I'm not saying the conflict, but I mean probably the situation for females in this environment. How important do we think it is to encourage women for these scientific careers and has gender been removed as a challenge in this field or is that still something which might hinder a female's – women to get into this field of business?

**ALLISON BALLMER:** Yeah, I would say if we're having this discussion, if we're asking the question, then it's probably still a relevant topic.

**FRANK MUELLER:** So I should avoid the question?

**ALLISON BALLMER:** No, it's a good question. And I think we talk about gender parity as an aspiration. And I think about gender parity as there's quantification to that. The number of women in leadership and the amount of wealth managed by women, etc., but I also think about the quality of that. And when I think about when you're in the room where it happens, it is my voice. Am I being heard, am I being honored, am I being respected and is my perspective being solicited?

So there's a quantity and a quality aspect to that. And I think it's tremendously important for women to be participating in their areas of interest. And for me, when I was a student, I loved science. I loved especially physics and math. And I didn't appreciate in my secondary school and whatnot, I didn't appreciate that that was a male thing. It wasn't until I got to my undergrad that I realized, oh, why all of a sudden is there a disproportionate amount of men and so few women studying physics and mathematics and things of that nature?

And actually, was in that environment where I became really burdened by the sense of do I belong, don't I belong? And I really if I could like fix the world, the one thing I would really want to address is the psychological and social barriers that we encounter and also that we put on ourselves. I really want to encourage women and especially girls to pursue their interests regardless of the gender orientation that we kind of associate with them.

And so, there's a psychological and a social barrier, I think, still that still exists for women in kind of the hard sciences. And it's important that – I think it's really important that women model for our younger generations, the ability to thrive and nurture the excitement around sciences and mathematics. So that there is more parity. But the bigger impact is that these are the sorts of roles, these STEM roles are the jobs that are valued more in the workplace, literally monetarily valued. And I want more women controlling wealth. I want more women to be



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making more money. I mean my philosophy on compensation is how do I pay you as much as humanly possible because if you've got that mindset, you're also going to have a generative perspective. So I want more women controlling more wealth, investing more in women and kind of taking down some of these social and psychological barriers.

**FRANK MUELLER:** Okay, yeah, that's interesting. And I think the diversity is so important for us, not only as a society, but also in the different companies to really get the most out of the individuals and get the impact and the power of each individual. I think this is so important.

And by the way, just to add an on-side comment. I started marketing where the ratio of women in the room and male was 80/20 and 20 was the male portion. So just as an on-side comment. It was vice versa. Perfect.

Allison, you're located in the center of power, the Silicon Valley. This is where everything comes from. I feel that the whole technology side of our planet is kind of steered out of the Silicon Valley. So my question is, for the product development cycle, also specifically for your strategy on mergers and acquisitions, what role do the big startup community in the Silicon Valley has? What's the importance of driving all this innovation?

**ALLISON BALLMER:** You know, it's so interesting. When I moved to the Bay Area, when I moved to Silicon Valley, I had relocated

from Lake Geneva Switzerland. And I felt like being an American and working in Switzerland, I had this like cultural – total culture shock. But moving to Silicon Valley was almost equally as great of a culture shock because it beats to its own drum. And there is a hunger and a thirst for innovation, for entrepreneurship, for invention. And I think one of the things that I've observed almost as an outsider looking in or as a participant observer in Silicon Valley is that it's actually not that hard to become an entrepreneur. It's not that hard to have an idea and invent.

And I really want to encourage more women and minorities to continue to pursue entrepreneurial endeavors because when I think about when I first moved here, there was no Uber, there was no Lyft, there was no ride sharing, there was no Airbnb. When you think about all the tech innovation, it was all waiting. It was all ripe and waiting for that to be created. And so, when I think about the importance of that invention sort of mindset and entrepreneur mindset, we're all affected by it and we're all dependent upon it.

And when I think about I'm in a large Cap company and I'm dependent on it from an M&A perspective because the pace and the risks that can be taken and venture backed in entrepreneurial sort of endeavors in these sorts of companies, there's a different risk profile. And through risk, greater risk, and greater reward and there's an opportunity to create, that I think can sometimes I think can become encumbered in larger companies.



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And so, when I put my large Cap M&A hat on, I want to see more and more invention coming from these grass roots entrepreneurs because they're able to look at problems differently than how I size them up. They're able to see opportunities that are different from the framework that I see through.

So I think the biggest risk we've seen really in the last five years is that a lot of these wonderful entrepreneurs and inventive people are absorbed into larger companies. They're absorbed into the large tech companies and there, the invention is housed inside of these large Cap companies.

And so, when I studied at London Business School, there was this philosophy that said and there was a bunch of research around it that show that the pace of entrepreneurship, internally my own entrepreneurial spirit diminishes after six years inside of a company. And so, if you think about that, that means that all of us may have the opportunity to be an entrepreneur, to be more inventive, to create. And sometimes it's just the environment we're in that is the hinderance. It's not our capability, it's not our access to funding, it's not our inventive nature, it's the environment. And so, I like to encourage people to place a bet on themselves.

**FRANK MUELLER:** Okay. That's interesting. You just described our world seem to get more and more complex and it is sometimes really difficult for the individual to find the right path. How important do you see networking groups, such as the G100, in which you are a member

of, how do you see – what role do they play generally and specifically for you in your daily job?

**ALLISON BALLMER:** Yeah, I cannot stress enough the importance of networking and, Frank, this is such a smart question. It's really a smart question because when I reflect on my own career, I think, gosh, the last three roles that I've had, I was introduced to the opportunity by someone I knew and someone who's going to sponsor me or advocate for me in getting the position. And I think about the networking group I'm a part of, like the G100 or the World 15, things like that. And through that, I have a safe place to ask really basic questions. Like maybe you're in an environment where you don't feel the safety to ask that question. But I go to my network and I can ask those questions. I can be in a position where I don't know and we're kind of supporting one another.

So there's like a mentorship and a support aspect there. But there's also through networking and not just these sorts of groups, but they're networking in my own industry, in my own career. I'm given opportunities for that sponsorship, for people to see me, believe in me, bet on me, open a door for me. And when I've mentored women who are at an earlier stage in their career that I am, they often ask me, how do I network? I keep hearing that networking is important, but I don't feel – and maybe it's just they're not given a lot of opportunities, maybe it's this imposter syndrome. I don't feel like I belong. How do



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I find it? How do I network and how do I find a mentor or a sponsor?

And I have a little framework I use, Frank. You know, I can share it with you. I borrowed this from a friend who does a lot of kind of leadership coaching and it's called Head, Heart and Core. And when I think about introducing myself in networking, I can do that from the head, facts. Information, facts, like, hey, I went to Virginia Tech, where did you go to school? Oh, I studied this. Where did you study? I've done these projects in my career. What did you do? And so, you can connect on that informational exchange level.

Deeper connections happen in the heart. Well, you know, I witnessed the Black Lives Matter movement and that really impacted me. I'm feeling like I need to do something around that. How did you experience that? Maybe it doesn't need to be such a charged issue, but it's connecting on the heart level, I feel.

And then, getting down to the core is, hey, these are the things that matter to me most. These are my beliefs. This is my sense of purpose. And when I connect with someone at that level, there's a lot more commitment to one another. When I think about the people in my network who've had the greatest impact on my career, we connect at that core level. We have shared beliefs, we have shared purpose, a shared mission. And they're going to raise their hand on my behalf because those are shared values. And so, I think about the value of networking really depends on from where you're doing that,

from the head, from the heart or really from your core.

**FRANK MUELLER:** Please excuse that personal question, but I need to jump into that. So is there one person you can say was the best mentor you've ever had and is there a reason why? Can you share this with us?

**ALLISON BALLMER:** You know, I feel like I've had so many mentors and there's one woman who when I was in the early stage of my career, around 25, 26, who was levels ahead of me and she and I were often in the room together and it was very like, we were working on FDA reportable events, high risk, super important, the tensions are high. And I was the youngest, most junior person in the room and I would watch her ask the most basic questions. And I thought, oh, I didn't realize that there was permission for me to not know. I thought, oh, I have to come into this room and I have to know everything. I have to be fully prepared and I have to share everything I know. But she came into the room asking about things that she didn't know. What are my blind spots? What's around that corner that I didn't see? Tell me about the perspective you have over here because you're in a different function?

And she approached her environment with curiosity and that really gave me a sense of permission to not know and to be curious, rather than all the pressure I was putting on myself to have all the answers. And I think that what that modeled for me was the tremendous amount of empowerment and



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because I didn't have to show up and know everything all of a sudden. It was like I could start to connect with people and enlist people in solving the problems in a much more generous way.

So when I think back to across all the mentors, I felt like she really had this very defining – she modeled something for me that was very defining early in my career that's really impacted the way I approach circumstances now.

**FRANK MUELLER:** Because they'd be very lucky to find these kind of people. It is just so engaging if you find somebody who is supporting you in such a great way. Perfect.

Allow me to cover on your industry you are working in, in the Med Tech, Med Device industry and the actual crisis we are in globally. How do you see and what do you see in terms of the role the Med Tech and the Med Device companies play specifically in this health ecosystem within this pandemic? What is the role we – that the industry should play here?

**ALLISON BALLMER:** Yeah, it's tremendous and as much as we've seen great crisis, we've also seen these bright spots and these silver linings. And I think that one of the things that's been pronounced to me through this is, especially as I've spent the majority of my career in diagnostics and precision medicine, I have friends of mine that work in theater, who are asking me about the difference between this test versus that test. And they're starting to take more ownership around their health status. And they're starting to appreciate how different

aspects of our industry, our very broad industry, can influence their lives.

And I've been super excited to see how kind of non-industry people, the community, the culture has taken such a committed interest in understanding their status and using these tools and getting to the bottom of it.

One of my best friends works on Broadway and he was asking me about the difference between this vaccine and that vaccine. And wanted to know how should he be thinking about MRNA versus a traditional antibody vaccine or whatever. And I thought, wow, these are questions that we're asking ourselves that we've never had. We've taken for granted. We've gone in blindly. And I think that this is going to create a shift. Societally, I think we have yet to really uncover how much we're going to take more ownership of our health, how we treat our bodies, how we understand our bodies, the data we use, what goes into our bodies and how we relate with others because of that.

And so, I think that in a way, this pandemic has created an opportunity for empowerment around the very tools and technologies that we all work on.

**FRANK MUELLER:** Yeah, with all the bad things happening around us, probably this is the good news that health really gets in the center of our thinking and



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probably gets more awareness in our daily lives that we are taking better care of others and taking better care of ourselves.

Allow me one last question. If there are no barriers, no limitations, what are the three things on your wish list for 2021?

**ALLISON BALLMER:** Well, this is –

**FRANK MUELLER:** And Christmas, unfortunately, is over. So I am asking it anyway.

**ALLISON BALLMER:** Well, I really want a puppy. But, okay.

**FRANK MUELLER:** Well, we can write this question in the personal wish list and in the professional wish list.

**ALLISON BALLMER:** In all seriousness, of course, I would love to have a puppy. I think all of us being – because so many of us are sheltering in place or working remotely and I think that in 2020, we saw just – it was the year of great distress and also sort of great hope. A year of disaster, a year of glory and when I think back to 2020 and the pandemic and a lot of the social justice initiatives that really surfaced through the Black Lives Matter movement and whatnot, I saw conversations taking place and whether it was like we just discussed with respect to COVID and health and my own personal empowerment around let me take this test, let me know my status, let me protect you, let me protect my loved ones, to conversations around police, policing and inequities that are

associated with decades and centuries of injustice. And so, conversations started in 2020 that I think have been relegated to the people who were most devastated by these issues. And my hope in 2021 is that we can really engage in these sorts of discussions, especially around social justice and especially in a way where we can put ourselves in another person's shoes, so to speak, and seek to understand.

Especially, in the U.S., I think the globe has watched American politics be remarkably polarized. And I would love if I had one wish, it would that those polarized perspectives could really say, let me spend a day walking a mile in your shoes and understand where you're coming from. And that would allow us to come together more and maybe have more productive conversations and more agency around our perspective.

**FRANK MUELLER:** Thank you so much, Allison. That was very insightful. Thank you so much for your perspective and thoughts. And, yeah, I hope that your wish list comes true for 2021. Thank you.

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