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Local consultant's new book encourages extra steps to improve communication, relationships

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As a child, Michelle D. Gladieux often slid into the shy zone when an adult tried to talk to her, especially if the adult had significant stature.

In those moments, Gladieux would take refuge at her mom's side. Well, actually, she would hide behind her mom's legs.

But by the time Gladieux turned 23, she walked into a Trine University classroom – not as a student, but an adjunct professor to teach. Most every student in the class was older than Gladieux, but she's pretty sure any initial skepticism students might have had about what they could learn from her was short-lived.

How you present your passion and knowledge “can move mountains,” Gladieux, president of a Fort Wayne-based consulting firm, said in a telephone interview last week.

For years, Gladieux's passion has centered on helping others learn to have stronger, more meaningful connections, and last year she released a book to provide a concrete road map.

“I just identify with folks who aren't comfortable with their own voice yet,” said Gladieux, author of “Communicate with Courage; Taking Risks to Overcome the Four Hidden Challenges.”

Hidden challenges? Gladieux outlines them in the book – Hiding from Risk, Defining to be Right, Rationalizing the Negative and Settling for Good Enough.

It's that first one that tripped Gladieux up as a child. When she seemed uncomfortable talking to tall people, her mom would help her sort through those feelings after the encounters. Gladieux said participating in activities such as science fairs or reading at church also helped her through those early intimidations.

As an adult, Gladieux has struggled with defining to be right. Her book describes that as thinking you have all the answers or at least the best one. It can mean being quick to judge and putting too much stock in your assumptions.

This challenge can be toughest to manage with the people you're closest to, Gladieux said, especially if you're frustrated or disappointed.

"Sometimes you write the book you need," she said. "I'm hoping this book is timely and timeless."

Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc. released Gladieux's book in November. It's widely available, including on Amazon.

Gladieux says in the book that she hopes readers will see it as a manual that helps turn risk into reward.

She writes that fear is typically inherent in hidden challenges.

Fear is natural and can be lifesaving, Gladieux says, but it can also "overtake our spirit and dilute our power."

Endorsements on the book's back cover include one from Karl W. Einolf, president of Indiana Institute of Technology, and Dr. Jonathan Walker, founder of Modestly Mindful LLC.

"I wish I had read this book decades ago," Walker wrote. "It offers immediately useful ways to shine a light on habits that get in the way of effective communication."

The book has received attention in some prominent mainstream media, including Forbes and Inc. business magazines.

Gladieux hasn't been on a book tour, per se, but has been sharing some of the insights and ideas in presentations, talking to for-profit and nonprofit organizations and as a keynote speaker at conferences, often providing the audiences with supplemental, take-home material.

Gladieux Consulting helps clients with team training, executive coaching, strategic planning and process improvement. Improving personal communication among team members has been a primary focus.

The four hidden challenges Gladieux outlines in her book are based on years of self-reflection and experience, but also observing and engaging with others.

She thinks the book can help readers build confidence and success, whether in the workplace or in other organizations, and with family and friends.

Fort Wayne-area readers might notice some names in the book as Gladieux shares some of her experiences, often in a transparent way, including early on mentioning her mother's battle with cancer.

The book offers several exercises readers can consider along with specific communication strategies –Gladieux calls them Pro Moves – to help improve interactions and relationships.

And Gladieux thinks the tenets in the book can work for both extroverts and introverts.

Extroverts, for example, might be encouraged to work on listening and “opening spaces” for others to enter conversation.

The Pro Moves provide steps that could help people, especially introverts, “find voice and confidence to join into conversation.”

Communication – not knowing how others might respond – can require taking risks, and Gladieux addresses those in the book.

She includes risks that might not be worth taking.

Depending on what someone is juggling, all four “hidden challenges” could manifest on the same day.

“The key is just when you can become aware of it. You can behave more strategically as a communicator,” Gladieux said. “There’s often more we can do to improve a situation as communicators than we realize.”

She considers communicating intentionally and well an activity with high return on investment.

Life is “less complicated,” she said, “when we get better at communication.”

To share a thought, a favorite quote or other wisdom about leadership, email Lisa Green at lisagreen@jg.net.

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