

## 84. Our Story of Success: Finding Partners to Support Your Vision - Transcript

**Leah:** Welcome to Her Story of Success, a podcast featuring stories from influential women trailblazers and business leaders who have defined & pursued their own versions of success and fulfillment. I'm Leah Glover Hayes, CEO and podcast host of Her Story of Success Women's Business Collective. At Her Story of Success, we believe that there is power in stories. We believe that hearing stories of success, failures, lessons learned and celebrations is a beautiful form of mentorship that can inspire you on your own journey and are honored to share this experience with you. If you've been with us since the beginning, then you've probably heard Her Story of Success evolve over the last few years, but that desire to give women space and platform to tell their stories and share them with you has stayed the same.

Recently, I've had a lot of people ask me about my own story of starting Her Story of Success. Even if you listen to this podcast every week, you probably don't know the full background of how Her Story of Success came to be. So with this special two-part series, I wanted to give you an inside look at *Our* Story of Success and introduce you to some of the amazing people who have come alongside me to help grow this business. I plan to be very honest and very practical about the details of what it looks like to start and grow a company, and my hope is that you'll gain some beneficial tips or inspiration for your own career journey. And ultimately, I want to help you see that you can do it too. This is Our Story of Success, and we're so grateful to have you along our journey.

The idea of creating Her Story of Success really stemmed from this desire to grow in my own career and find mentors who could help me on my journey. I was in my mid-30s, and honestly I was just trying to figure out what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I knew I wanted to do something significant that helped others succeed and that I really enjoyed — Who wants to do something they hate? Not me. So I was already in this mentorship process that included passive mentorship and traditional mentorship. So passive mentorship, I'm reading books and listening to podcasts about starting companies and finding and pursuing your passion, and I was also meeting with mentors in a traditional mentor setting. So I would sit down at coffee and have some open and honest conversations about their journeys, struggles, and accomplishments. And during this mentorship process, I realized a few key things. First, I learned that people genuinely want to help other people succeed and were willing to mentor others. I started to understand just how much people love to share

their stories and that they wanted to have a bigger impact. As I was meeting with all of the amazing women, you know, before COVID we did things like meet for coffee, I realized such amazing things could happen through having a conversation. So I started to wonder, what if I could put all this together and multiply it? You see, people want to mentor you, but they have full lives. And people like me want to get mentorship, but I don't have access to everyone. So at the time, I'm listening to a ton of podcasts and I realized what was missing, the questions I wanted to ask as a woman. Yes, I care about the things they have accomplished, raising capital, and how they got successful, but really I wanted to hear the heart behind it. What were their fears? What was the conversation they had in their own mind? What were the insecurities and struggles? What did it look like to talk to their families when they wanted to quit their jobs and start a company? And what was it that made all the hard times worth it?

So I emailed my favorite podcast host at the time and asked if he would be willing to meet so I could ask him about starting a podcast. Then I decided, yes, I could share these amazing conversations I was having with my mentors and heroes on a podcast, and I could help so many women who might not have the opportunity or the courage to find these mentors in their own lives. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that creating a podcast for women to share their stories would be a win-win-win. I would get to grow and learn from the conversations, the women I was interviewing would get to increase their legacy by sharing their stories with a wider audience, and you would have the opportunity to learn and find inspiration from their stories.

So as I was dreaming and planning for this podcast, I didn't have my vision completely nailed down, but I knew I wanted to empower other women like myself. I knew so many women in our mid-30s who had hit some level of success but still hadn't figured out what they really loved to do. We were working hard and making money and then giving back to a charity on the side, because that was what we were maybe really passionate about, but we were burning ourselves out in the process. And I think that's what so many women are conditioned to do — go to work, work hard and then give your time to something you care about — but it wasn't what I or they wanted. We wanted to be able to do work that we loved while still enjoying the life that we loved. I love to travel, and I wanted to be able to do that and all of the things. And I wanted to empower women to do the same.

In those earliest days, there was a ton of noise about, "don't share your goals, just put your head down and go to work for them." But I didn't believe in that because I am

and have always been a team player. I like to do things with people, not by myself, that doesn't get me excited or stir me up. And I'm really glad that I didn't take that advice, because when I met Ellen Hoffman at a networking event and shared my idea with her over coffee, it turned into a beautiful partnership.

**Ellen:** I said, "That seems like such a good idea. And I kept thinking of a woman that she should interview. And after we got together later on, I would email her more people. And then I started thinking and I said, "Hey, actually I want to interview these women." So I reached out to Leah and I said, "You know, would you be open to having a partner in this? And she said yes. And the rest is history.

**Leah:** As Ellen and I started working together on this podcast, we knew we were going to have to be strategic about how we used our time. We were both still working at our full-time jobs, so we decided that we would invest our dollars rather than our time into the podcast creation and production.

Through a potential client meeting, Ellen had met Clark Buckner from Relational Marketing, a B2B podcast production company. Clark offered to sit down with us and give us some advice, and through the conversation, Ellen and I quickly realized just how much work goes into producing a podcast. We didn't want to spend our time learning about equipment or editing and speeds and feeds, we just wanted to have the conversations. So we hired Clark, it was a great decision for us to work with Clark and someone as incredible as Relational Marketing. With Clark and his team handling the production of the podcast, Ellen and I got to focus on interviewing amazing women.

**Ellen:** I had had a career path up to that point that hadn't been too fulfilling for me. And while I enjoyed it, I just felt like something was missing. So I loved finding women who felt very fulfilled in what they did and maybe took a different turn along their career path and a different path that was maybe a little more rewarding.

**Leah:** We knew from the start that we wanted to do things differently than many of the business podcasts that are hosted by men. We wanted to highlight the complexity of women, and create space for conversations that weren't just about work, but also marriage, the single woman life, motherhood, dealing with infertility, real life family stuff, and all the things that make up a woman's life. And through talking to women who were loving their careers and lives, Ellen and I were learning so much about what we wanted our own journeys to look like.

**Ellen:** I also personally focused on the challenges of motherhood and being a new mother or being a working mother, because after we had started the podcast, I had my first baby and that had just been a huge, earth shattering change for me.

**Leah:** There are so many lessons I've taken away from those early days of building the podcast, but I think one of the biggest things I learned was the importance of tapping into our own network. We didn't have the budget to hire people at all, so we really relied on the people around us who genuinely wanted to help and be a part of what we were building. Actually, Ellen's cousin made our logo and set up our website and her mom was writing our early blog posts. Thank you so much Ellen Green. As we started to grow a little bit and needed to be building a team, we also tried to find people who could benefit from working with us in ways that weren't just monetary. A great example was when I hired Isaac Jones as a photographer.

**Isaac:** At that point we connected, and she was like "I need lots of stuff. I need content, I need live events, I need these things." And I said, "I'm happy to help however you need."

**Leah:** Isaac was looking for a way to grow his portfolio, and at the same time I was looking for someone to start photographing our live events.

**Isaac:** So that included taking photos, editing things, doing video and doing some of their fashion pieces. It included bringing in some different voices and different people that we knew. So I did that for a long time. I got to travel with her in New York and did some of their content there. So I'd say my photography skills grew as Her Story grew, because when it started I was very new to this – What is an event? I can go take some pictures. I have a camera and I am doing this – all the way up to now, I get to do photography as my side hustle. So I appreciate all that opportunity.

The other thing is, she did bring me some other clients, whether it was portraits or headshots for people or I was doing, like I've done Ellen's family photos three or four times. And I love doing those. So she's done a great job of connecting those things. Those are the two things that have been great for my career, just practice and getting to really be able to hone in. You know, it's not often when you're trying to learn things that you get an opportunity to get paid or an opportunity to get connected. And so getting to do that was worth it.

**Leah:** Through Isaac, I was able to get connected with some other people who were looking for opportunities to build experience in social media, blogging and brand

partnerships. I think that's always important when you're hiring, but it's especially crucial when you're just starting out. A top priority in hiring for us was to give people opportunities that would benefit them in their careers and help them reach their goals, and in turn, they were loyal to Her Story of Success and passionate about helping us grow.

**Isaac:** If you can't network, you can't really grow anything. If you can't get more connections and whether it's through Her Story or photography or my, my full time job with Thrivent, like they are all based on networking. Because you've got to get connected to people and ask for introductions and get connected to more people. And it's who knows who, especially in a town like Nashville, where it really is based off of like, you want to get a job, you want to do something, you gotta know somebody. And so I've watched Leah do it just really naturally. She's like, "Oh, I know this person. I met this person." She's out and about, she's chatting. For me, when I was with her. It was, as soon as she saw a need, she was like "all right, who do we know that we could bring in and have that conversation?"

**Leah:** I'm so grateful for Ellen, Isaac, Bri, Alexandra, Jenna, and Jessica, and all the others who helped shape Her Story of Success early on. With their help, I was starting to see the potential of what this business could become, and I was getting ready to leave my full-time job and commit fully to Her Story of Success.

But sometimes, when you're making these big changes in your business and getting ready to take a huge step, you might realize that you and your business partner aren't on the same step. Ellen was so instrumental in helping me start the podcast, but she was also getting ready to have her second child and wasn't sure that she could fit the podcast into her life anymore.

**Ellen:** I felt like Her Story of Success was really at a crossroads where we really wanted to take the podcast to the next level that we both wanted it to be. We were going to have to commit a lot more time on top of what we were already doing, and it really needed to be a full-time job. And Leah was at a point where she was ready to do that. I just really liked my career as a financial advisor. And I felt like I had a lot left to give in that space. So I really was not ready to give that up at all. I used to do so many boards, had so many volunteer activities, I worked all the time. I had tons of friends, was doing social activities, really enjoying the podcast. And I just realized that I was probably going to have to give up most of those things if I wanted to be the kind of hands on mom that I wanted to be. So I was really worried about the decision, and I spent so much time thinking about what I wanted to do, and it was so hard for

me because I loved the podcast, and I really didn't want to give it up. Because it was just fun and exciting and a great learning opportunity. And then all the amazing women that I was continuing to get to meet and interview. But at the same time, I just felt very overwhelmed in life and kind of weighted down by all the responsibilities that I had. And I knew it was from a mental health perspective that I couldn't continue to do all those things. And I had to give some things up. And I think one of the things I was most worried about was how I was going to tell Leah. Because we had built this amazing business, and had so much fun working together and I knew how important the podcast was to her. So I was really, really worried to tell her, and I really practiced on how I was going to bring it up, but then of course, and I should've known, but she was so receptive and supportive and amazing through that process. So it definitely made me feel like I had made the right decision and it made me feel much better having her support in that process too.

**Leah:** Though it was definitely hard to see her go, I was so proud of Ellen for making that decision and having the courage to embrace that her life and her priorities had changed. After all, Ellen was redefining what success meant for her in that season of life, and really, that's what Her Story of Success is all about.

**Ellen:** It was a really hard decision. But then I think it was actually a podcast that we had done an interview we had done with Tallu Quinn, who I'm a huge, huge fan of, about the seasons of life. And how there can be things or activities that are so important to you for various seasons of your life. And what it made me realize was that HSS had been such an important thing for me in that season of life, where I've gotten to interview 30 amazing women who I admired, I'd gotten to start a business with Leah. I had gotten to learn how to do a podcast, and I just learned an invaluable amount of things from that experience. However, and I was entering a different season of my life as a new mom, as a working mother as well. And so, unfortunately I just had to let some more things go and that podcast with Tallu and just framing it from a season standpoint is what helped me realize that it was time to focus on other things for my next season.

**Leah:** Even as I was so excited to see Ellen thrive in her new season, it was really a difficult transition for me. I knew I wanted to take Her Story of Success to the next level, but I needed a partner who could help me build the business side and turn this expensive hobby into a real company. Many people will tell you that you shouldn't go into business with a partner, and I understand why, but I knew that I wanted to find someone whose superpowers would complement mine and make me better and that would really love being a part of this as much as I was. As I was thinking about

women I could potentially partner with, Melissa Aldridge came to mind. Melissa had this unique background where she's really been on all sides of building a business. She had a finance background, she's worked on the venture side, where she was investing in other companies, but she's also worked with companies that were looking to fundraise and helping them build their pitch decks. I had only met Melissa a few times at this point, but I really believed that she might be the person who could help me build this company into something great.

**Melissa:** She sent a text message late at night and wanted to talk early in the morning. And she's caught me at the right time. And I think we've talked about this before. It's all timing in a lot of these things, it's how you get into relationships, how you get friendships, where you are, it's timing. So when she first asked me, I was a little shocked because in my mind, we hadn't had a lot of interactions where she would have a strong sense of my capability. And so I sort of was like, "Whoa, Whoa, are you sure that you want me to be this involved in something that matters this much to you? And how do you know that I'm the right fit for you?" And so I think we went through a really curated process after that. Because I kind of wanted to make sure we were both on the same page about what we were getting into, because it's a business marriage in some ways.

**Leah:** Before Melissa and I entered into any kind of agreement, we went through an extremely comprehensive process of getting to know each other and having some very vulnerable and very tough conversations. I do think this is one of the most important steps for anyone who wants to start a business with someone else. Because like Melissa said, becoming business partners is really like getting married. You need to plan for every possibility and make sure you learn how to communicate, and write out the divorce plan even though you hope you'll never need it. Melissa and I worked through this massive document that covered everything from how we make decisions, to love languages, to different personality tests, to what hurt our feelings and what made us feel important. We wanted to make sure we could communicate well with each other and be able to work through any crisis as a team.

**Melissa:** The nice thing about a business is that there's an operating agreement or maybe a board, investor rights agreement, it just depends on what the relationship is. You have a planned divorce when you go in. And so that's a great thing about a business, but you're also trying not to do that, right? Like this is a going concern. You want to ride out some things, but what is absolutely positively for sure going to happen is the unexpected. So I wanted to get a sense of, how is Leah going to respond when that happens and how am I going to respond to how she's acting or

behaving or reacting and vice versa? So I wanted to learn how to fight with Leah before I had to, I wanted to learn how to come to decisions with Leah before I had to, I wanted to learn how to have productive disagreements and how to productively get things done. Another reason is we're, we're not in the same city. We weren't in the same city when I was in Knoxville and we're not in the same city now that I'm in Chattanooga. We're in the same state, but even with COVID, I think I've seen Leah two or three times physically this year. Um, and so that adds, it's like a long distance relationship that you're going from zero to married overnight. And that's a lot of pressure on any two human people. And so when I started thinking about that, I was like, well, what can we do to stack the odds in our favor that we're going to get along. That even when we don't get along, we're going to be able to have empathy and compassion for the person on the other side and be, uh, and quickly build trust that even when we don't understand the other person's behavior, that we have some foundation of knowing that they're all in, or they're behaving this way because of, you know, we can kind of understand the circumstance and their dynamics a little more, which will allow us to maybe have some more grace with one another on a more regular basis.

**Leah:** Going through this process of really getting to know Melissa gave me so much confidence in our relationship and our ability to build something great together, but honestly also in myself. You see, the more I got to know Melissa, the more I realized, "Oh my gosh," what an amazing person that she was and how much value she really would provide to this company. It also helped me uplevel as a communicator, because we were having such great conversations about business and entrepreneurship, and really digging in to decide what we wanted this company to become. This whole process also helped me find more clarity about what I was looking for in a partner, and what I wanted to accomplish through this company. I was still the main investor, so I didn't necessarily need Melissa to invest her money, but what I wanted and needed really was her time and knowledge. I think this is an important thing to keep in mind if you're an entrepreneur, because ownership of your company is really, really valuable. You don't want to dilute your company by giving too much away to investors. With Melissa I was comfortable with partial ownership in exchange for sweat equity, because I knew we were already aligned on the mission and vision of Her Story of Success and that she wanted to be part of it for the long term.

**Melissa:** I mean, money is nice, but so is building things for the future. So is doing things that fill up your cup in one way or another. And, and so is getting to do fun work with people you enjoy being around. At the time that she approached me, I was

consulting, I was looking at going toward a full time role. I wasn't sure that the full-time role that I would take was going to fill up my cup in all the ways that I needed it to, as any job isn't expected to cover all your bases, as any relationship isn't expected to cover all your bases. And so what I thought is, "Okay, I'm putting a puzzle together, for me personally. And if I can have Her Story of Success be a couple of these puzzle pieces, then that takes some pressure off of some other decisions that I might be making." And so it's really about what am I getting out of this instead of money? One, I get the opportunity to have input in a way that I might not, if I weren't a partner, where I'm being compensated in, you know, sweat equity, that comes back to what my, one of my passions are and that's, you know, advancing women and having this authentic way of showing up for women and providing them resources and, uh, in an accessible manner. That's really important to me as a single mom whose time is limited. Who's trying to just be a mom boss and, you know, not necessarily a hustle and grind, but a blend. It's a chance for me to sort of test out my own skills where there's no safety net. So I get to own both the successes of it in some ways and the failures. And for me, that was really important because at times I've felt like I've put a lot into things, other people's things and not gotten the chance to own the successes that I was a part of, but have been really responsible for the potential failure. And for me, I wanted equal footing in both, and I wanted my picture there. One of the things I keep with me is a front page of a newspaper article that a former group that I was working with took, and I don't know that they intentionally did it, but the thing missing from the picture was definitely me. And it was delivered to my front door at like six in the morning, you know, like a newspaper is when we used to get such things. And I'm looking at this picture thinking, "I didn't even know this interview was taking place. And I'm the link between all of the people in this photo." And not only should someone have said, "Wait, why are there no women in this photo?" But also, "Where's Melissa?" So for me as a, business owner, it's the chance to own the successes and failures, but for me as a woman and finance and then of course, in what we're doing, having the opportunity to say "You can do it too, and it's okay to own, to feel proud and to on a regular basis, say 'Yeah, I did that, and I should be in the picture.'"

**Leah:** Once Melissa and I had decided to be partners and go through the process of defining that partnership, we were so excited to start taking Her Story of Success to the next level. I learned a lot in that first season of starting this podcast, but the biggest thing I realized was leveraging my network and surrounding myself with the right partners and teammates would help me turn my vision into a reality.

So if you're looking to start a business, you absolutely need to learn how to ask for help, and find people that can bring unique strengths to the table. In the next Our Story of Success episode, I'll be sharing the story of how Melissa and I built the rest of our team, along with some lessons I learned along the way about outsourcing, knowing my value, and more.

Before we close out this episode, though, I wanted to take a moment to thank you. This podcast truly would not exist without all of your support and engagement, and I'm so grateful that you've chosen to be a part of this journey. If you want to further support the mission and vision of Her Story of Success, one of the best ways to do that is by sharing this podcast with other women in your life who are looking for mentorship and inspiration. You can follow us along on social media and stay engaged with all of the events and opportunities by signing up for our newsletter at [Herstoryofsuccess.com](https://Herstoryofsuccess.com). And we would love for you to reach out on any of our platforms, I would love to personally talk with any of you.

Thank you for joining us today, and I look forward to talking to you again next week!