

SPECIAL ISSUE

CANADA'S BUSINESS MAGAZINE FOR WOMEN

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INTERNATIONAL

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**TEACHING YOUR KIDS**  
*About* **CULTURAL DIVERSITY**



# Laugh It Up!

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Q & A *with* Lee-Anne Ragan



*Corporate trainers deliver workshops on teambuilding, diversity and cross-cultural conflict resolution – all with a serious dose of humour...*

# Q & A

BY KATHRYN BECHTHOLD

*with* Rock.Paper.Scissors President Lee-Anne Ragan

**L**ee-Anne Ragan is President of Rock.Paper.Scissors Inc., Vancouver's award winning international corporate training company. Lee-Anne works with organizations to improve their effectiveness by using innovation and improvisation to help staff grow and develop. She's garnered local, national and international acclaim for her work as a specialist in training trainers and teambuilding, communications, and cross-cultural and conflict resolution training.

Mompreneur CEO Kathryn Bechthold recently asked Lee-Anne about her work over the last 19 years, which has taken her and her young family on cultural adventures around the world, what led her to the international stage, and what she has learned through it all. Laughter. Learning. Leading. For Lee-Anne, it's all in a day's work...

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**Q:** Can you tell us about Rock.Paper.Scissors, and how it evolved as you came on?

**A** I became involved with Rock.Paper.Scissors in 1997 when it was an unincorporated sketch comedy troupe and they asked me to do some conflict resolution training with them. I never laughed so hard in my life – there’s nothing quite like doing conflict resolution with professional improv comedians!

In 1999, when the owners decided to incorporate, they invited me to become an owner. They wanted to expand and were looking for someone who was outside the entertainment field. I had been self-employed doing customized training for corporate and not-for-profit clients, so it was a natural move to widen the scope of Rock.Paper.Scissors to include training.

We rebranded in 2003 and really took some time to link the entertainment and training aspects of the company. We launched our Humour in the Workplace Awards which recognize individuals, large organizations and small organizations for their strategic use of humour in the workplace. It was a key time in the company’s history – we won Business in Vancouver’s “Top 40 Under 40” award, and business was humming.

Today, I’ll often bring improv comedians with me and incorporate improv scenes into my training. The scenes are based on what’s happening in our clients’ workplaces and they anchor or reinforce the training content we’re covering.

Whether we are performing customized comedy for an organization’s special event, or conducting interactive training for executives or front line staff, our work is based on four principles:

- **Humour:** Improv is a core element of the humour we offer and our workshops are known for their interactive edge and funny and fun pathways to learning.
- **Social responsibility:** We consider the world our classroom, and whether we’re working locally or internationally, we work hard to give back and be community minded. An example of this is the creative program evaluation work we do in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (Canada’s poorest postal code) and the cross-cultural conflict resolution training work we’ve done in Kibera, one of Africa’s largest slums.
- **Diversity:** Inclusion is key to everything we do, as people won’t learn or laugh if they’re not feeling included. This means paying critical attention to a variety of aspects of diversity.
- **Creativity and innovation:** We embed creativity into everything we do and what’s more, we help our clients rediscover their creative DNA while we’re at it, because we’re 100% convinced that everyone is creative.

I’m the majority shareholder and President of Rock.Paper.Scissors, and I couldn’t be more fulfilled: I get to make a living doing what I love, I feel like I’m making a difference at both the individual and organizational level, and it’s a wonderful fit with our family life.

**Q:** You have a tremendous background with working in different countries throughout school and in your early work. Can you tell me more about that and some of the lessons you learned while working with different cultures?

**A** When I was a teenager, I was involved in an international development leadership program at my local YMCA. It whetted my appetite for international issues and for travel. When I was 18, I was a Katimavik participant and I lived with a group of other young people in three communities across Canada for nine months. Going into the program I wanted to be a fashion designer (I actually got my acceptance letter during the program) but the experiences I gleaned from our incredibly diverse group changed my mind and I went down a different path, getting a degree in Social Work in Community Development.

During my undergraduate studies I did a semester through the University of Pittsburgh, only I never set foot on campus. My campus was a ship. The program was called Semester at Sea and we traveled from the Bahamas to Seattle, stopping in 17 countries in between. I’m not sure what I learned more from – the cross-cultural experiences that came from the international travel, or the equally vivid cross-cultural experiences that came from living on board the ship as the only Canadian and work study student (assistant ship’s photographer) amongst American students.

In my early years of work I was very involved in international development and worked both locally and internationally. Currently my work includes working with the United Nations, which has taken me to China and Kenya.

My husband travels extensively as well, and we both work hard to create a family experience out of our travels. If one of us is traveling, we try to bring the whole family along and make an adventure out of it. Our sons are now 7 and 12 and they’ve been traveling internationally since they were both babies.

Some lessons I’ve learned about being a traveling business owner:

- Patience really is a virtue.
- The best way to learn about your own culture is to travel to another.
- Cell phones that are unlocked (do this online) and have a removable chip are a godsend. You simply pop out the chip and replace it with a local one!
- There’s nothing better than having a reliable host – someone to translate not only the language but also the culture.
- Patience really *really* is a virtue!



**“...we’ve been very fortunate to lead lives that have made it possible for us to include our children in these adventures and we look forward to more.”**

**Q:** You do quite a bit of work with the United Nations. What an enormous privilege! Can you tell us a bit more about that work and how it came to be? What kinds of programs do you run in Africa and Asia?

**A** I attended the World Urban Forum – a United Nations conference in Portugal – and when the same one came to Vancouver, I applied to give a workshop. I was accepted and at the end of the workshop a gentleman came up to me and said he wanted to introduce me to the former President of Mozambique, the Honourable Joaquim Chissano – winner of the \$5 million Prize for Achievement in African Leadership – who had just participated in my workshop unbeknownst to me.

That turned into a lovely working alliance. He and I just presented a peace building workshop together at the World Urban Forum in Nanjing, China. I’ve also conducted cross-cultural conflict resolution training in Nairobi, Kenya through the United Nations.

Currently I’m working on a contract which will see the cross-cultural conflict resolution training work expanded to Kenya, Mozambique, Uganda and Tanzania. The focus is on enhancing the capacity of youth to take leadership roles in their respective communities, in ways that are respective of a variety of cultures.

**Q:** You speak quite a bit about how your business chose you, and not the other way around. How so?

**A** Prior to 1997, if you had told me I would be self-employed and loving it, I would have told you that you obviously didn’t know me very well (and privately I would have thought you were crazy). I thought it would be all about selling myself, and that was not very appealing. After the birth of my first child however, it wasn’t possible for me to work part time or job share, so I left my employer.

For the first time in my life I had no clue what I was going to do. But then a magical thing started to happen...clients started calling. They’d ask if I could do “X” and I’d say sure. They’d ask how much I would charge, and after a pause I’d say I would get back to them. Later they’d ask who they should make the cheque out to, and after a pause, I’d say I would get back to them. Business banking, invoicing, website design, branding – it was all a mystery but it worked itself out.

When I gave birth to our second child I realized I was eligible for a self-employment training program. The only thing was, you had to start a new business. Up until that point, my business had focused on training for the not-for-profit sector, so I started a mirror business in the corporate sector.

I’d already been a business owner and knew what I wanted to emphasize: a business that worked with my family and a business that I ran, not one that ran me. I really appreciated the training and was able to take what was helpful (for example the financial management and business planning aspects were great) and leave the rest (we were told to put our hand over our hearts and take the marketing pledge, which was to make as much money as possible – not the most socially responsible approach).

I’m fortunate that clients generally don’t need training done during the summer or at Christmas, so it fits the kids’ school schedule perfectly.

I’m excited about what the future holds, even far into the future, which was hammered home when on safari in Africa one day. My son turned from looking at the zebras to ask me “Mommy, am I going to inherit your business one day?” Hmmm, it made me think about a whole other roster of possibilities (including doing co-training with him when he’s a bit older).

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**Q:** I love how you have included your children in all of your travels. What has this level of integration into other cultures done for them?

**A** There have been benefits all around. One of the things I love is listening to them talk to their friends when we come home from a trip. Their interpretation of what we've done and seen is often quite illuminating and creative. For example, my husband was doing some work in France and Spain, so we all went along. When we got back I heard Liam tell some friends, "in France you can't walk on the grass in the parks, and that's why there's so much dog poop on the sidewalks." Out of the mouths of babes...!

I like to think it's made them more aware of the world, of possibilities, of the similarities between all people and also the differences that make a difference. We talk a lot about privilege – they've been into the slums and seen grinding poverty. As a result, part of their allowance gets donated to causes of their choosing.

From chatting with monks in Thailand (who spoke no English) to learning how to tie their turban in Morocco; from watching camel wrestling (yes, camel wrestling) in Turkey to watching prides of lions Kenya, we've been very fortunate to lead lives that have made it possible for us to include our children in these adventures and we look forward to more.

**Q:** Do you ever get nervous working in the areas you do or bringing your children along?

**A** I remember coming back from trekking in Thailand with our youngest and telling a parent at our preschool that we got leeches. She looked horrified and asked if I knew there were leeches before we went. I didn't think it was the time to tell her about how you can't possibly get hurt from a leech (they're just vile looking little creatures).

So, no, I don't get nervous. I do however:

- do a lot of research about an area before I go.
- have a trusted host who is from the community I'll be working in and who I can rely on to keep me out of trouble.
- bring an extensive first aid kit with me. My most used item has always been Pepto Bismol tablets – those little suckers can ail the most upset stomachs!
- keep my eyes wide open and am not ostentatious – no fancy jewelry, I dress as much as I can like a local, etc.

I firmly believe that too many people rob themselves of some wonderful opportunities by worrying about what might happen. In more than 20 years of international travel I've never had any serious problems; rather I have had a lifetime of learning, adventure and unbelievable memories to pack in my suitcase and reflect on when home.



**Q:** What are the long term plans for Rock.Paper.Scissors?

**A** We have become known for interactive training that helps people laugh (be engaged and curious), learn, and lead (by applying skills they've learned in their workplace right away). What I'm really keen to do is take those skills and expand them to mobile learning. I've been researching the field of e-learning and mobile learning for some time now.

In the meantime I'm working on starting a blog and am also getting an assessment I've developed, called Eight Lenses, online. Eight Lenses is an interactive tool that helps people, teams and organizations to identify and better understand their individual "lens" on the world. An engagingly unique and effective tool, the Eight Lenses allow us to see what comes onto our radar naturally, easily and comfortably as well as what never makes it onto our radar.

**I'll often bring improv comedians with me and incorporate improv scenes into my training. The scenes are based on what's happening in our clients' workplaces...**

**Q:** If an entrepreneur wanted to work in other countries on a regular basis, what advice would you give them?

- A** Before you go:
- Do some work to understand your own culture first. This might sound odd, but especially if you are from the dominant culture, you may not be aware of what your culture is all about because it's so big, and is all around you.
  - Think long and hard about what your definition of success is. Be flexible about as many things as you can and stay true to who you and your business are.
  - Do some research about the country(ies) you want to work in but don't assume everyone from that country will fit the mould (that's like thinking all Canadians love maple syrup and hockey).
  - Take some training. For example, Rock.Paper.Scissors offers cross-cultural communication and conflict resolution training specifically for people working overseas. People can contact us for more information and/or to receive a complimentary resource list.
  - Know that all business is about relationships – be sure to establish them, nurture them, and build on them both locally and internationally.

When you're there:

- Try to find a trusted, local host that you can ask questions of and rely on for advice and support.
- Bring examples of your own culture, pictures from home, gifts to give away.
- So much is about your mindset. Be curious. Be open. Be engaged. Know that only about 10% of a person's culture can be easily seen or observed. The rest is below the surface so try hard to not make generalizations and assumptions.
- Get lots of rest and give yourself lots of time to recharge. Plan on sleeping more than you usually do. When you have to figure out how to use the bathroom (believe me, there is a surprising variety of toilets worldwide), work in a different currency, eat different food, work in a different language, or a different climate, etc. it can be exhausting.

**Q:** Do you have any tips you can share for cross-cultural negotiations?

- A** When I do cross-cultural training, I emphasize a number of skills including:
- **Creativity:** be open and willing to do things differently, which is often easier said than done.
  - **Assumptions:** making them can kill business deals quickly. As we're often blind to our own assumptions, often the best way to highlight assumptions you may be making is by discussing the situation with a trusted associate.
  - **I.C.U.:** no, this doesn't mean 'critical care'. Rather, balance looking at any given cross-cultural communication from an **Individual** perspective (what about my international associate is unique, individual), a **Cultural** perspective (what about my international associate is aligned with his or her cultures) and a **Universal** perspective (what do we both have in common because we're both human).🙏

To learn more about Rock.Paper.Scissors, visit their website at [www.rpsinc.ca](http://www.rpsinc.ca) or you can reach Lee-Anne by email at [laragan@rpsinc.ca](mailto:laragan@rpsinc.ca).

