

# Demystifying Innovation

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Episode 1: Frank Cappadocia

## **Nathan Whitlock**

Welcome to Demystifying Innovation, a podcast from the Office of Research and Innovation at Humber College. I'm Nathan Whitlock, a Professor and Program Coordinator in Humber's Faculty of Media and Creative Arts. In this podcast, we talk to academic leaders about the setbacks, challenges, obstacles, and outright mistakes they've faced in their careers, and the important lessons they've drawn from those moments. My guest today is Frank Cappadocia, Humber's Dean of Continuous Professional Learning.

## **Nathan Whitlock**

Welcome, Frank, thank you for doing this. I really appreciate it.

## **Frank Cappadocia**

Thank you very much, Nathan. Happy to be here.

## **Nathan Whitlock**

And speaking of being here, I'm going to talk about your new position in a moment. You're quite new in it, but you're not new to Humber. I wonder if you could talk about that a little bit? It's sort of a return.

## **Frank Cappadocia**

Yeah, it is. It's literally a coming back home of sorts. So, I'm a proud Humber alumnus, I graduated in 1992, from the Lakeshore Campus in Law & Security Administration, with a dream of becoming a Police Officer. And, ironically enough, one of my instructors was Gina Antonacci, who is our current AVP, about to be Senior Vice President Academic. But Gina was one of my instructors, and I was SAC (Students Association Council) President of the Lakeshore Campus. I was very involved, even at that time. So I moved on from that pathway, but really it was that experience in SAC, the student council, that gave me my first perspective on actually working with students professionally, and actually having this as a career. And so that really — fast forward 30 years and three institutions later. I mean, I had a wonderful run at Ryerson, and then it was at York University as Director of Student Affairs and then I was doing all kinds of stuff at Lakehead. And now here I am, as a freshly minted Dean of Continuous Professional Learning. So it is a return home of sorts, and the interesting part was just how that genesis exposed itself to post-secondary opportunities. And the fact is, you know, I was

one of the first transfer students that came into York University from Humber, and Humber and York had come up with this "two plus two concept"—or at the time, it was a "three plus two"—years ahead of everyone else. So I was the beneficiary of that. And I've never forgotten how important it was to have the opportunity to keep pursuing my lifelong sort of ambitions in the post-secondary area. So here I am.

I'm in, again, a very dynamic and fluid space where I'm pulling together our faculties, and the associate Dean's within each of those faculties, and the sort of outlier entities—corporate training services and others—and beginning to leverage all of those together. So it's about alignment, new opportunities and maximizing what I call capital H Humber. It's pushing the full experience forward, institution wide.

### **Nathan Whitlock**

So obviously, the concept of innovation plays a huge role in your job specifically, but I wonder if you could talk about that? About how you approach that how you look at that in terms of making sure we are always pushing forward and innovating.

### **Frank Cappadocia**

Well, I think any institution of higher learning has innovation as part of its core dynamic. I mean, it quite simply has to. It's the embodiment of that innovation that really is the most interesting part. How it actually percolates throughout the entire organization, and the ecosystem, if you will. I've been so impressed with the work that has been happening at Humber relative to innovation and the type of innovative things that Humber has been doing. It's part of the reason I came, I was drawn to this kind of innovative environment where we can have the opportunity to push new enterprises, to move things in a slightly different direction, or to go in an entirely new sphere of influence. And so, you're quite right, I've arrived as someone who's known as a change agent. I love change. Actually, I thrive in environments that are fluid, and where opportunities abound. There's no question in my mind, prior to accepting the position and as I explored the website and I poked around and did my due diligence, there's no question whatsoever that Humber is positioned to make some dynamic leaps forward. And so that innovation space that Humber's already moved into in a variety of different frames, really can be actualized. My hope is actualized in the professional learning area, and in a slightly different, more assertive way—if I'm going to be honest—and certainly in a highly creative one. So, I'm going to forecast your question, and I'm going to forecast something else, and it's that we aren't just in the space where students want us to be, we have to be thinking of what their needs are going to be two and three and five years out. And so good forecasting is about looking out into that new and dynamic world of ours and saying, "What's next? And what's the next big thing for our learners? And how do we set ourselves up to be in a place to support them?"

## **Nathan Whitlock**

Yeah, I mean, one thing I'm often telling my students, especially my post grad students who sometimes have an opportunity to do some work with the college after they graduate, or even while they're students, I'm always saying, grab it, do it. Because Humber's almost like a little city unto itself. Constantly, new things are being built, new projects are starting, there's lots of opportunity to move into roles that are completely new, and the boundaries have not yet been defined. So, it's not like going into a place where everything is so established, the roles are so set, the boundaries are there. You can really write your own ticket, as they say.

## **Frank Cappadocia**

You're so right about that Nathan. My journey to this place has been a very interesting one with all kinds of twists and turns. I can tell you that some of those twists and turns were shaped by my own design, and some of them were by the environment and places and spaces I was within. But I couldn't say that there was really any one job that I didn't end up shaping or framing by the time I left it. So that by the time I started versus what I had on the other side of that journey, often completely different. Or, you know, fundamentally the same, but lots of different pieces on the backend. So shaping and reclaiming opportunities are a key part.

## **Nathan Whitlock**

But you did open the door to what is the sort of central premise of this podcast series and of this conversation that we're having, which is: you've been in a lot of roles and a lot of institutions, was there a moment that you can remember very vividly where you tried something—to implement a new process, a new strategy, a new project—and it just fell through? It just didn't work for, for reasons beyond your control? Or maybe that reasons that were in your control, and you didn't spot in advance? Was there a moment of a professional failure?

## **Frank Cappadocia**

Oh, there's quite a few of them. To be honest. I don't think you can have success without failure. So let me be really clear. Anyone who gets to a certain stage in their life, in their career has had a series of setbacks. And really, so fundamental to that is how do we respond to those setbacks? How do we press our own reset buttons internally and then move forward? One of my favorite books is by Peter Vail, and it's called *Learning as a Way of Being*. What Peter Vail talks about in there is living in permanent whitewater. He talks about, you know, we are in fact on a journey that's a lot like being in permanent whitewater, and if anyone's gone whitewater rafting, they know there are a couple of decisions you can make. One of them is to scream, because you're joyful, and happy, and excited about this terrifying experience. Another is to scream because you absolutely want the ride to stop, but it's not Canada's Wonderland. The ride does not stop. We're in the boat at the exact same time. Our decision is how we react.

So in answer to your question, and I'm not dodging your question, I'm gonna answer it. The answer is, yes. The one that jumps so vividly for me was the preparation of orientation for York University. So, I was very involved in establishing York's Penn University Orientation Program, which in the case of York was 7,800 first-year students coming in to participate. And I, as someone who really values efficiency, effectiveness, and maximizing and leveraging resources came up with the best solution of all, which was hosting our lead events at the Roger Center, which was a relatively new environment, but it's this beautiful tennis environment, perfect for announcements. You've got a big stage; you've got a lot of things happening. And from an efficiency standpoint, from an effectiveness standpoint, you got a lot of crowd management capacity there. Big crowd comes in, big crowd exits, another crowd comes in. In my mind, I thought this was an absolute brilliant solution. And about two weeks before orientation—and the plan looked magnificent, I mean, everything really looked solid, wonderful team behind me—a student leader came in to talk to me. Now at York things were pretty interesting. We had 19 student led organizations at York's student governments, and one of the college presidents, who had come to get to know a little bit, decided to come in and chat with me. And he wanted to talk to me about orientation. So I thought, you know, it was going to be a standard conversation, he's going to tell me how excited he was about this new initiative and how we had bridged it. In fact, he was part of a lot of meetings with us. And instead, he said something really shocking. And he said, "you know, with all due respect, Frank, you're making a huge mistake." I was kind of taken aback and I said, "walk me through this, I don't understand where you're going." He said "that Roger center is off site. It's not really on your property, it's off your property. None of us, as your students, connect with that as a center. We don't connect with it as a part of York. And so your introduction to York is actually taking people off site, and then doing a variety of things, and eventually, kind of bringing them back with that first iteration of what York is, is actually going to be with a bunch of Roger stuff on it. It's a Tennis Center, it's not York University."

Well, I have to tell you, it was like a two-ton brick in the head, it was like someone had dropped a small brick off the CN Tower, collided into my cranium at a very high speed. Because I knew, instinctually, that every single thing he said was true. Now, I'm two weeks away from delivering York's first Penn University program. And I had a very fundamental decision... This this gentleman's name was Ruben Clark—great college level president. Either take what Ruben said, and kind of shrug my shoulders say, "hey, we're just past the point of no return." Or—now I teach leadership, my master's degree is in Community Leadership—do I have to accept that what he's saying is true, and therefore owe it to myself and to those incoming students to reconfigure the program, two weeks before we launch. This is akin to taking the shuttle out of you know, NASA and moving it to California, from Florida. And that's exactly what I decided we had to do. And so we had to relocate spaces. We had to get the main gymnasiums back into the plan, we had to literally call—and this is what we did—we call every one of those 7000 students to let them know that our location changed. Email was still in that choppy phase when you're doing mass emailing. So the only way I could guarantee that we didn't have 2000

students show up in the wrong location, we literally made direct calls. Here's the thing about that, and it was an amazing thing. Because I sat down with the whole team, I explained what happened, I explained my decision. I said, "I need their help to make this work." And we literally cut up those 7000 students divided it between 22 folks involved some volunteer partners got another 22, we got the call center involved. We literally called 7000 plus prospective students. That's never happened before, York had never done that. Our participation rate was higher than anyone had expected. Because of those phone calls, because of the messages that were left and the follow up messages that came. This was a whole new business model that we ended up employing by mistake—this high touch outreach to these students. People thought it was impossible, but was done within a week, we had done it, we had relocated, and the model that ended up spinning out from that is something we still employed in different ways.

So that was a very tough day. It was a very tough couple of weeks. But the fact is, we underestimate a team sometimes and their ability to step up when you, as a leader, acknowledge your own failings, faults, injuries. I learned a very valuable lesson that day, which is: instead of playing the hard card, which sometimes leaders do to say, "Hey, I don't care if we've made a mistake, I'm just not going to own that." I did what I consider the right thing. And Ruben afterwards said to me, in a tongue-in-cheek way, "you made the right move, but you should have asked us sooner." There, again, was a really good lesson for me, as someone who specializes in big events—I'd run Ryerson orientation, I created orientation programs, I've run Penn University events my entire career—to have someone say, "hey, you should have asked," and as someone who thinks that they're highly participatory. That also reminded me that even when you think you've covered all your bases, you probably haven't. So triangulation is really important. Trying to get different perspectives on an approach and really being prepared. Being prepared to fail. There has to be some risk tolerance in your day-to-day life. We all have to have some of that certainly have a certain amount of that risk tolerance. And it's trying to find that right balance between being foolhardy on one hand and being an innovative explorer on the other and being prepared to find that that right place in between.

### **Nathan Whitlock**

And you can imagine a different leader or a different administrator—we've both probably worked under this kind of administrator—who, getting that call from the student and saying, "well, we're going ahead with it. I think I know what I'm doing. I've done this before. So well, this is what we're doing. It's a great idea." We can also imagine this and again—we've probably both worked with that person—who making that mistake, and even changing the plans, then goes forward, very risk adverse. What would you say to that person who maybe took that chance, who took a step out and then had to completely reverse it? How do you tell them, "look, it was a mess up. There were failures within it, but it worked. In the end. Don't let that intimidate you into the future"?

## **Frank Cappadocia**

We talked about risk tolerance. If you look at any of those folks who play X-Sports of any kind; the bikers, the snowboarders. The number of faults that they had to deal with in order to have that level of expertise is just astounding to me. Now, it's something I'm never going to try, I'm never going to get out of BMX bike and try to do a flip, that would be the end of Frank.

But one of the things that—you know, the interesting thing is that recovery is a part of my DNA now. Having fallen this many times as I have and managed to dust myself off and come back at it again. I am not keen to repeat the same error twice. So part of that is not embracing failure. What I think you have to say is, "okay, what did I learn from the experience?" So ultimately, what were the learning competencies? What did you take out of that? What are you going to sharpen the tool around? And how do I sharpen the stick enough that next time you know it'll impact more widely?

But really, it's also giving yourself some permissions there. I could have beat myself up, and there were occasions where I've done that. I've certainly beat myself up 10 times more than any supervisor ever could. As a recovering perfectionist, I would say that's probably the single biggest mistake we make. Once we've made that error, we dwell on it, continuously reliving it. And what we have to repeat is, "what's done is done and can't be undone," right? What's done is done, can't be undone. It wasn't fun. And I'm going to move on. And that little rhyme that I just gave you is one that I've literally repeated to myself 10,000 times when I find myself perseverating around something that didn't go well. And where I've had to say "okay, now what? What are we going to do with that?"

In the world that we're surrounded within, there are all kinds of things that we see that we would change—ideas that, you know, didn't work out the way we hoped. But to be paralyzed by fear is the saddest thing of all. What fear does more than anything else, Nathan, is it kills confidence. The very first victim of fear is confidence. What is most important is to, as they say, get back on the horse as soon as possible. There couldn't be a truer perspective there. Try your best to give yourself maybe a day of reflection or self-loathing if you have to do that. But then at the end of that 24-hour period, please, you have to try to reconfigure and to start moving forward. That's probably the best advice I can give.

You know, I'll leave you with a quote from Winston Churchill. And it is that adversity takes us where our character failed to lead. There are—as someone who teaches leadership, I will embed six, seven different examples of mistakes that have ended up helping the entire world in different ways. So these errors in disguise, or opportunities in disguise, are something that we have to think through. So I would just say treat them as opportunities in disguise.

## **Nathan Whitlock**

Thank you so much for your time, and welcome again and congratulations.

## **Frank Cappadocia**

Thanks very much, Nathan, greatly appreciated and look forward to maybe we'll be chatting again soon.

## **Nathan Whitlock**

And that is the podcast. Special thanks to Ginger Grant, Raeshelle Morris and the Office of Research & Innovation. To Sarah Nieman and Chris Middleton at Humber Press, and to Humber's own Andy Scott, who provided the music for this podcast. This episode was edited by me, Nathan Whitlock.