

Amanda Fisher

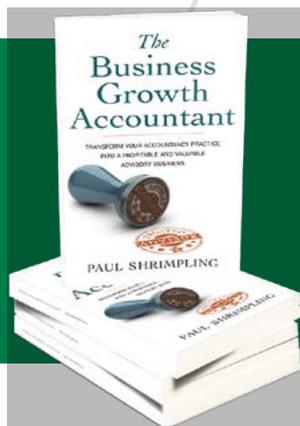
CFO & Business Mentor
Speaker and Author of Unscramble Your Numbers



Amanda works with business owners and entrepreneurs mentoring them with the skills they need to improve cash flow, increase profits and grow their business.

I believe that every business owner needs to understand their business numbers to give them the best chance at success. My personal goal for this year is to educate 1000 business owners about how to improve their business cash flow through my online training course and to work one-on-one with 20 businesses in my Business Mentoring/CFO program.

Paul and Amanda talk about Amanda's work and how her experience from both inside and outside the accountancy profession have helped differentiate her in the business of Business Growth Accountancy work.



Amanda Fisher

Paul Right, Amanda. So, would you, to kick off with, please give me the background to your current business and how your role has evolved from accountant into business advisor? I know there's two questions but I'm trying to give you as much leeway as I can to kick off with.

Amanda Okay, so, I'm a chartered accountant in Australia by training and I have worked in public practice for the majority of my working life. I have done a number of... I did a full-time stint as a financial controller for a group of companies and I've also done some financial controller roles within my employment over the years and within my practice. So, I have been involved in, what I call, the other side of the fence.

On the, kind of, the accountant side looking in, which for a lot of accountants... I think that is one of the things that differentiates me. I think the other thing is that over the last, I'd say, about five or six years now, I have made it my life's work to educate myself on other aspects. So, I have done a lot of education around sales and marketing, general business and I've done a number of courses, done a couple of 12 month programmes and things. And, in doing that, have completely broadened my knowledge and... around business in general. Not just about the numbers.

So, I have always been working in business, with business clients, so my background is always business. It was never audit or any of the other things that chartered accountants do. It was always business services and, you know, I've obviously learned things along the way. And one of the things that I just became more and more passionate about was doing

more than just the tax compliance type work. And to add in, I have myself started writing books. I'm now a triple author.

Paul Yes, I saw that.

Amanda The second book I published a year ago... about 18 months ago now. Unscrambling your numbers is very much around the... what are the numbers that business owners need to understand and how can they use those numbers better and get their head around it so that they can make smarter decisions and improve their business.

So, what I did do was... what I found was... I had a practice with five staff in Australia and three in the Philippines, we're off-shoring some of our work. And I found that, even with the support I had, it was really, really difficult to devote the time I wanted to in doing the business advisory work. And so, I made the decision to sell my practice and keep the business advisory side of it.

Paul When was that, Amanda?

Amanda That was in June 2015. So almost 18 months. So now I work exclusively doing business advisory type work or CFO work. There's a whole different terminology around what it is [laughs]. But that's what I do. So I'm solely, at this point in time, a sole practitioner with a couple of, sort of, virtual assistants, one in Australia and one in the Philippines.

Paul And how many business owner clients are you working with at this moment in time then, Amanda?

Amanda It's about 20.

Paul Okay. And the work that you do with them, is that predominantly advisory as opposed to anything to do with accountancy? Or is there a blend and a balance? How does that structure?

Amanda Okay, so, my starting point basically is being told by the bookkeeper, or whoever it is doing the bookkeeping that the accounting sales is reconciled towards the end of the month. And at that point in time, that's where I kind of kick in and that's when I start pulling together specialised reports that are... well, they've got some generic... some standard figures and some generic figures, but also more specialised KPIs depending upon the business. And I start doing some reporting on that.

My starting point with most clients is probably tidying up some of that to make sure that it's management recording information, not just what you need for the tax man. And, so, putting the ledger into a better order so that we can get more medical management reports. Producing budget and cash flow projections and identifying what are the, you know, the KPIs that we need to be focusing on. Yeah. The ones that need some urgent attention. And then work my way... work our way through those.

And obviously they change over time to help improve the cash flow, the profit, the value of the business.

Paul Brilliant. So, if we organise the group of your clients around a round table and ask them what was the primary reason that they choose to work with you, what sort of response do you believe we'll get?

Amanda I believe I would get a couple of things. So, the first thing I would get is that I'm... having worked with me... sorry, is this a question for before they made the decision to work with me or why they do continue to work with me?

Paul No this is more a question about... yeah, I guess they're related but I appreciate from my experience that it does change. But let's talk about your existing clients. So let's say we've got about half a dozen, or a dozen of them around a table and we say, you know, go on, tell us what's the main reason that you get value out of working with Amanda, what would their response be?

Amanda Their response would be that I've simplified... well, the complex... simplified the numbers, the reports, the bits I need to look at but she talks in a language that I can understand. It's not full of jargon or highfalutin whatever. It's, you know, from the first... one of the things that I often get is for the first time I actually understand what you're saying. I've had three, four, five, seven accountants in the past and I've never understood, you

know, what's in a balance sheet or what's in a profit loss and why it matters. For the first time I actually get it.

So it's that simplification of the explanations is one of the big, big things they would say about the value they get from me. But more than that it's obviously the results they're getting in terms of improvements to their business and profits and cash flow, etc.

Paul Yeah, yeah. Run me through then, if you would Amanda, how you work with your clients. Talking to them, seeing them, how does that... you know, the mechanics of the advisory work that you do with them, how does that work then for you and your clients?

Amanda It potentially falls into the category of virtual CFO work. Now, when I say potentially, I don't... I do do CFO work but I come from a slightly different angle. So my belief on a role of a CFO... the role of a CFO is... if you've got a business that needs some of that work, whether it's on a part-time basis or a full-time basis, there is a role for a CFO forever in a business. Right? My... I don't see myself in that kind of role. I see myself more in the role of education.

So I see myself as an educator and that my role is to educate the business owners on the information that they need to know to be able to make informed decisions based on their numbers. So, my... the way I work with clients is, I sign them up for a 12 month programme.

At the end of that 12 months, I expect them to be able to be quite competent in looking at the relevant reports and be capable of

understanding and interpreting those results in, you know, making decisions or being at a point of saying, you know, I think this is what it is, do you agree. And one of the things that I see that I do really well is, you know, one of my results is... that's where they're at. Now, they may want to still get the advice from me but the education phase has disappeared at that point and they can off and do their own thing.

Paul And that's within the year?

Amanda Twelve months, yeah.

Paul And does that happen every time Amanda?

Amanda Yes it does. Sometimes a lot less than the 12 months but depending on where their starting point is. But that's what I'm achieving through that. So the way that works is the first month or two is usually a lot more intense. I usually start off with a face to face meeting that can go up to two to three hours where we go through, in detail, everything to do with the business.

So I want to know exactly what happens to the business, how it runs, what that means, who do you employ, what they do. Just the whole kind of overview but quite detailed of what's happening in the business from an operational perspective as well as, obviously, some kind of, you know... okay, what bills are you paying, how does that work. From that we can then develop what the main KPIs are.

We need to be focusing on the areas of immediate focus for improving the results in the business. And how does that then make sure that the reporting is right and then produces the cash flow. So for the first month or two... there's that big meeting up front and then there's, yeah, some backwards and forwards quite regularly within the first couple of months.

Once we get that settled down and comfortable, from then I am available on email whenever they have a question but we basically set in a monthly meeting and usually it is a virtual meeting. So I run most of my meetings via Skype or Zoom or, you know, one of those type of platforms so that we can see each other. I send the reports to them in advance of that meeting.

We then have that online meeting, go through the details and the next step in the education, look at what needs to be talked about and then the plan for the next kind of month. But then, as I say, if they need something in between times, it's faster via email. And then if they need something that's more of a conversation, then obviously we pick up a phone or a Skype or something and talk through the issues in greater detail. Yeah.

Paul So in that first 12 month window, how many face to faces will you have?

Amanda Real face to faces? One or two at the beginning and sometimes I'll organise another one halfway through. But, oftentimes, when we start getting into those virtual meetings, they're happy with it because they're not having to travel anywhere for the meeting. We're still seeing each other face to face, so I can still see their facial expressions and I can understand... I can see the... I don't really get that.

So I can see when things aren't landing, I can see when their eyes light up. You know, you can still get the body language thing which is important. And so, yeah, for most of them they're quite happy to... after that first, initial meeting when we first create the relationship, from there we just run everything else online.

I'm working with one of them, we're getting towards the end of the 12 months, I might do a face to face right towards the end of it and decide whether or not, you know, what they want to do moving forward. You know, to scale it down to just some advice from time to time or how do they want to do it. Because obviously there is an element of advice in there, it's not just education, it's... yeah... it's still the advice that's going through.

Paul Yeah. I appreciate you have 18 months into your new business and therefore this question is tough, but how many are recycling working with you after the 12 months programme?

Amanda So... I haven't got anybody that's bowed out as yet because I haven't got to the 12 months on them.

Paul Right, okay. That's understandable. So that would be... I'd like to have another call with you in about 18 months' time and see how that one pans out. This conversation is really interesting for me. I presented recently to an international group and one of my pieces is... in the trust and advisory space, face to face is critical. Without it, you can't really get to the levels of

trust that you need to in order to evoke a response and action, true deep down learning.

And the accountability piece is now. Now, you're challenging me on that. You're saying that, well, actually, Zoom or Skype or whatever is good enough to establish a deep down, trusting relationship where you can push a business owner's buttons and hold them to an account. What are your views on that? How do you think the Zoom compares with face to face?

Amanda It's interesting because I would have said I would have agreed with you in that you really need the face to face and that it makes a big difference. And I guess part of what I'm wanting to achieve in my new business is that I want the flexibility to be wherever I want to be. And that doesn't necessarily mean that I'm going to be in Australia. So, I spent six weeks in Canada just recently, you know, I kept the meetings going. We had them on Skype and they knew that I wasn't in Sydney and it worked really, really well. So, I think part of it is I... because that's what I'm wanting to do, I haven't... let me just think, actually, no, that's not true. I've got clients that have come on board that we've only ever done face to face because they're actually in a different city.

And although we... we're doing it on a virtual meeting and we've had the virtual meeting. The thing is, the ones that that works for though is, they already know who you are, they've been around me, they've possibly bought my book. One or two of the books. And they're reading my articles, they're active in communities that I'm active in and so they know who I am and they already have that level of trust that I will deliver and

that I'm the go-to person and the key person of influence in that space. So, that makes it easier.

The other thing where I think there is a difference where I'm noticing, and this is not... I'm at the wrong end of the age scale on this one [laughs]. But the younger generation are over the moon. That's what they want. They want... they're used to dealing with, you know, they've got the iPad and all that stuff in their hand all their lives and do everything on their phone and all that kind of stuff. It's not weird to them. It's not strange to them to be doing it all virtually.

You know, I had a lead call on Skype yesterday with a lady in Melbourne and, yes, I haven't actually met her somewhere else, but if we do proceed to work together, it will all be done via Skype. She knows that, I know that and, you know, if I am in Melbourne I will catch up with her, definitely. But, so, I think the younger entrepreneurial type business owners, and to me there is a difference between them and what I would call a traditional business owner, I think these younger entrepreneurial ones, it's not an issue. For the more established and slightly older, and realistically that's me.

Paul Yeah, and me.

Amanda Type people. From an age perspective, that's where I fall, well and truly. Then, yes, they want that touchy feely, face to face, have a meeting kind of exercise. So I think it depends a bit on who your target market is as to whether or not, you know, as I say, I would have agreed with you a few

years ago, absolutely. Now I'm saying something slightly different. But I am dealing with a younger market.

Paul I was on the conference on stage, I shared the platform with a young entrepreneur from the UK who unwittingly started his business when he was eleven and I met him at 18 and he's turning over £750'000 , doing very well thank you very much. And the conversation with Ben was that he really valued the handshake face to face meeting once a quarter.

And yes, there was the Zoom check in and yes, there was the phone calls. But, really appreciated that deeper relationship that comes from actually face to face. So, I think, yes there is a generational thing and also there's what right for the customer, isn't there? What's right for the client.

Amanda Yes, correct, correct. Like one of them, the one that is continuing on, you know, I've a couple of times said, do you want a face to face meeting and the answer has been, no, no, I'm fine. We'll just Skype. And, you know, we get quite detailed. This particular lady has, you know, split up with her boyfriend, had various challenges along the way and we're still having those conversations over Skype. It's not... sure, I can't give her a big hug but... you know, those details don't quite happen, but everything else does.

Paul Okay. What about in a group setting Amanda? If there's two or three business owners slash directors that you need to be interacting with. How do you find that? Or have you got any experience of that?

Amanda If you're talking directors in different companies...

Paul Yeah. Well, I'm talking about if you go to an organisation or company where there's three business owners and you're on a Zoom call and you need to be talking to all three, how well does that work?

Amanda Okay, so, I haven't had that type of client at this stage so I haven't had to try that. I'm working probably in the smaller, in the lower scale, at the moment where it's a one owner type business, not a multiple owner. Or multiple directors.

Paul Okay, brilliant. Because again it's... that question is coming from my experience dealing mostly with firms that are have two, three or more partners or directors. So I'm just curious about that.

Amanda Yeah. I think that would be harder [laughs].

Paul Yeah, I think so too.

Amanda I think that would be harder on Zoom. I mean, I do do joint meetings with other people on Zoom and some other groups I'm part of that I'm mentoring but I think, in terms of this sort of stuff, I think it would be harder to do that not in a face to face environment.

Paul Yeah, okay. So if we can now, can we drill then to a particular client, please for the confidentiality we don't need names or anything, we just want to gauge the client journey for want of the description and experience, but I'm interested in the outcomes that the business owners are getting from the work you're doing with them.

Can you run me through the client situation before you worked with them, what prompted you or what prompted them to get you to work together and how did that progress. So, rather than talking generalities, we want to talk about a particular client story so we can get some details and nuts and bolts around what and how you do what you do. So who do you want to talk about?

Amanda Okay. I'm going to talk about a florist client. So she's a specialised business. And I'm just trying to pull up some of my... I did some updated results to work out where we were. Let me see if I can find this quickly. I should have got this up beforehand.

Paul Don't worry. So how did you come to meet this florist, Amanda?

Amanda Okay, so, this was actually an introduction from a business coach. So, she had a business coach that she was working with and she... the business coach, actually I think he was an accountant by background, but he doesn't really get into the numbers and he's more in the overall mindset, other types of things, shall we say. And she was really needing some work done

on the numbers. She wasn't making a profit, so she wasn't. She didn't understand what her numbers were.

She didn't get her head around... you know, never understood what the balance sheet was and his comment was, I think you need to get some help on that and I know just the person for you. So he referred her to me and we started working on it. I just wish I could find this thing.

Paul Take a couple of minutes out and find your stuff Amanda. Don't worry about the gap on this call.

Amanda Okay, I know I've got it. Oh, here we go. Found it, okay. So when we started... okay, within the first eight months, this is, her turnover had increased by 40%. She had increased the number... her volume of her business, in terms of the number of transactions, by 37%. And we'd also increased the profit by 6%. So that was after we'd increased her salary by almost 60%.

Paul Right. So was she just starting or well established Amanda?

Amanda She had been operating for about 18 months at that time. She wasn't actually making a profit. She was... let me see... she was drawing a small salary to start with. Yeah, looking at the number I'm looking at here, she was on a normal salary. And we just worked on getting the figures, the detailed figures, so that she could see what was happening.

So we really broke down her cost of sales to every single line item we could think of and we started sending budgets around. You know, we want to try to get this under this number per bunch of flowers. So we were looking at it on a per bunch basis. And looking at, you know, how many dollars... how much does it cost in wages to put a bunch of flowers together. How much do the flowers cost, the packaging. You know, real detail on that and focusing on...

And the delivery. The delivery was a big one because that was quite expensive, some of her flower deliveries. So, really focusing detailed on that. At the same time, obviously, we were looking at the overheads but she had... she was pretty lean and mean when I met her so, she didn't have any [trapped 00:27:11] in the overheads.

It was really focusing on turnover, number of transactions, cost of sales. And in doing that, we had some wonderful results in terms of the increases there. I mean, I can't necessarily take credit for the increase in turnover...

Paul I was going to ask you that, what was going on there for you to influence that?

Amanda I would say that I didn't influence that too well... too well in terms of I didn't have a lot to do with it. She was doing a lot of marketing and that was... we were tracking what the marketing was, what was working and what wasn't working. She had done some of that already, I think, with the business coach.

So we... she was focusing obviously on the marketing that she knew was working. So, yeah. The increase in turnover, I find hard... realistically, I can't take credit for that. But certainly the increase in margins and stuff, definitely, that was all to do with what we were doing.

But a lot of the... like even the turnover increase was her setting those goals and going, okay, this is what we want to achieve for the month, how many bunches of flowers is that per month, how many working days are there, how many bunches do we have to sell per day and then I would kind of have that level of detail which she's never understood before.

Paul Yeah. So what kind of conversations have you had with the florist around KPIs and the drivers for action?

Amanda So that's where all of this has come from. So we've identified what some of those very specific KPIs were, particularly in the cost of sales, and have been working on improving them one by one. Well, basically, all at the same time but certainly focusing on a couple of them specifically at any point in time. And at the same time looking at some of the other more, what I call, the more general KPIs. You know, like all good florists if they... it's COD (cash on delivery) stuff. So, you order the flowers, you pay for them, they get delivered.

Amanda It's not any, you know, you buy the flowers from the market every couple of days, so it's very much, from a cash flow... in and out at the same time. We don't have big delays in payment and having to fund costs out before

the money comes in. So there wasn't the cash flow issues that I've had with other business. This one was obviously a bit cleaner in that way. But it was more around the gross margins, the area we spent the most time with.

But we've also gone through the detail of what is a balance sheet and she actually understands what it is and what it means and the impact of... she's been talking about getting a new vehicle and just what that means from a cash perspective but also from a balance sheet perspective.

So she's got a much better understanding of how that all fits together. Whereas before, I think she probably would have thought buying a new van was just an expense, you know?

Paul Yeah, yeah. Okay, so the main challenges for the florist were just not being able to see where the money was coming from or going? And you fixed that. Do I understand that right?

Amanda Yeah.

Paul Okay. And just then on the KPI piece, one of the issues that I find is... and obviously the business owners I work with are accountants but I run my own non-accounting business too... is KPIs can become... if there's too many of them, nothing happens. You know, there's just an amass of numbers. What do you do to cut through the clutter and get your business owners to focus on a selection of... you know, two, three or four numbers that drive a business?

Amanda Okay, a couple of things. So basically what I do on that is we have an extensive conversation fairly early on in the engagement and we're talking a lot about what they're looking to achieve, what are their goals and from that I'm then pulling out what I believe are the main ones that they need to be focusing on.

So reporting that I've replied at the end of each month is very much focused around those specific KPIs and yes, there are others that we touch on as we go so we make sure that everything else isn't falling by the wayside while we deal with that.

Paul Yeah, there's a balance.

Amanda Yeah, it's all fine and good to say that you're focusing on the gross profit but if she then goes and spends all her stuff on overheads then, you know, you're just bugging it up.

Paul The technical Australian term, was that?

Amanda Yeah, sorry [laughs].

Paul We have the same in Lancashire, Amanda, don't worry.

Amanda Yeah, so, the reports are very much... I don't put thousands of KPIs out there. I generally... I'm thinking of another client I was talking to the other

day, we're dealing with 12 KPIs but we're only really focusing on two or three of them. But we're reporting on 12. But I'm not reporting on 25 or 30.

And actually that other client that I'm thinking of at the moment, he's part of another business mentoring group that provides him with a 30 page financial report. I mean, even me, as qualified as I am, I looked at it and thought, oh, you've got to be kidding me. How anybody could understand it or read it or interpret it, it's just crazy.

And so one of the roles I've taken on in that role is to help him understand that report. So we're going to go by one page at a time and go through the explanations of what's in that report, what does it mean and how can he use it. But it was just a crazy report. I simplify stuff. I suppose, that's everything I do, in the way I speak and the way I talk to people about what it is. But also then in how I report back, it's the simple... you know, the old keep it simple kind of rule. That's at the heart of what I do.

Paul Okay. So the simplification points to helping the business owner achieve a level of confidence and certainty about the numbers. A, that it's the right numbers and B, that those numbers are accurate and C, that they're the right numbers on which to base their business decisions. The education pieces that you were talking about earlier.

Amanda That's right.

Paul How do you present the KPIs to your clients? What are you using? Is it particular tools or processes or methodology? I'm with you, Amanda, if it's not on one page, there's... we're struggling to help the business owner.

Amanda That's right. So, I think every single one of my clients is using Xero. I've been a Xero fanatic pretty much since it arrived in Australia. So, because they're on Xero, I use a combination of CrunchBoards (Futrl) and [inaudible 00:34:53] reports. I did at one stage use the Spotlight Dashboard. So that's a one pager. I found that it... it's for one page and it's graphical and I love the graphical displays because people just get it so much more easily than... you know, a page of numbers is just... eyes glaze over. So I kind of like that Spotlight Dashboard but it didn't really give enough depth in it.

So, you know, the CrunchBoards (Futrl) is really good and I just... I customise the CrunchBoards to give them the KPIs that we want right at the top of the page, we might have a few other things down the page, but, I just customise the CrunchBoards so that... but the hard copy. CrunchBoards didn't have a hard copy, I think they do now. But they didn't have the ability to print it in the past, so I have been running [inaudible 00:35:57] reports for sort of the actual basic...

And I find that they're good because, again, there's a bit of graphical display in there that is easy to understand and you can pick and choose your KPIs and be specific and cut out all the other ones that you don't think are necessary. So those the two main tools that I'm using, but I am looking to develop something more at the moment.

I was talking to someone the other day and he showed me what he's using and I've gone, oh, that looks pretty cool. I think I need to look at how I can copy that without copying it. Manipulate that and make it something that's useable from my end without unfairly copying his IP.

Paul Yes, indeed. So, back to your florist then. So your florist has essentially transformed her business. Partly because she has substantially grown her sales and partly because you've helped the florist profoundly changed their gross margin. And so, how far into that relationship are you now?

Amanda That's the one who has continued on so we're now about 18 months in. Because that report was the first eight months that I was giving you the differentials on.

Paul Right, and how are you... you've come off the 12 month educational programme, for want of a better... that you worked on. So what's the working relationship now? So presumably you had to then agree to work again... continue working together. So what's the new working agreement post your 12 month educational programme?

Amanda So the new agreement is that I continue to provide the reports and it's more now around extra advice and a sounding board for her for the decisions she's making. So, for example, quite... so a couple of things that have come up over the last few months have been her employee resigned.

So we then withdrew the process of identifying whether we replaced with another senior person or whether we replaced with a different mix of staff.

So we did a whole swag of number crunching and, you know, what's this option, what's the effect on the gross profit if we get two more junior, intermediate type florists as opposed to one senior one. What does that look like, what does that do for capacity, etc. So we've done some very specific analysis on the wage cost.

And then the other thing that's happened just recently that was quite a bolt out of the blue was her landlord gave her two weeks' notice to vacate the premises. She was not on a lease and she knew that it could happen. Obviously she was well aware of all of that. But equally, it did come as a bolt out of the blue. It did get quite legal here in terms of, that was nothing untoward within that. Other than two weeks to find somewhere to move to, pack up, move, do the whole shooting match, is a pretty amazing kind of restraint [laughs].

So, I was there with a bit of... you know, not a lot because she didn't have time at a certain level... this is what's happening and this is what I'm going to have in the new range. She was on significantly friendly rental rates because it was not a fixed lease. And obviously the guy had plans to do something and it was taking some time and now that had come around it was time to get her out.

So, those sorts of things, it's now more the... that kind of thing, the next step I know that is in the pipeline is the desire to open another location. So branching out. So that's a lot of the reasons why she's kept me on is because she does have these other, bigger decisions coming up. She's

working on and having that as the extra sounding board for help on some of those what if scenarios and plans.

And the discussion is around, well, what do you reckon and what would you do and is there anything I'm missing. Those types of... using my expertise and knowledge of all these years I've had working with businesses.

Paul Yeah. So what kind of investment are your business owner clients paying you Amanda? You know, you've got this 12 month education programme which sounds quite specific and defined in the way that you've structured that. And I appreciate that it will vary in some degree from client to client, depending on their needs and so forth. But how have you... what sort of spend is involved in working with you?

Amanda Okay. So it's \$4000 plus GST. We have GST in Australia, it's a sales tax thing. So I base my numbers on the price they ultimately pay because they get the GST back. So \$4000 plus GST for the first month and then \$2000 a month for the other eleven months.

Paul Right. So it's a substantial investment from the business owners.

Amanda Correct.

Paul So how do you... how do they... I'm talking both here. How do you convince in inverted commas or how do you get to a place with these prospects to invest so heavily in what is a hard cost with them with that financial advisory focus? So how do those conversations go?

Amanda That is one of the interesting challenges. So, I think the way those conversations are going is very much me talking about where they are at the moment, what are their challenges, what are their issues and then being able to identify how I can specifically assist with those. And, you know, what that would look like.

So it's very much looking... I'm putting myself in their shoes, finding out what they're really looking to achieve. And so, for example, one of my newer ones, I think we're up to about month three at the moment, he's a contractor. He does some fairly large-scale contracts. He was not really making any money but he's got some good prospects in the wing. But the problem is for him to take them on, he needs to scale up and he always seemed to be behind. His words were, I'm no good with money, if there's money in the bank I spend it.

So he needed someone to help him control what was being paid and to assist with a whole swag of different what if scenario type things. To identify how he could scale up and what he needed to do. One of the first things we did was we identified a contract that was imminent, he needed to actually get it signed up in the next couple of weeks to get that deposit paid. Because he desperately needed the money in the bank.

And so that kind of girded him into action to help pull that contract over the line sooner rather than later and, you know, encouraged him. So it's

those types of things that you can... you're enunciating that in a way that they go, yes, okay, that makes sense. I can see what the value is on that and I know I need the help on this because it's just not my area of expertise.

And, again, I'm talking these guys that are small business that don't have an internal bookkeeper. In his case, I also had to find him a bookkeeper. I don't do that work but I have a network of bookkeepers and accountants that I work with so I referred him to one of my colleagues. So she's done a lot of that work. And then I'm able to come in at the top level and do the other. And he's over the moon. But it's finding enough... them being in enough pain if you like...

Paul Enough of a pickle, yeah.

Amanda Yeah, enough of a pickle. To realise that I really need help and I need to be paying for it and then obviously in trusting that I'm the right person. Now having written the books that I've written, I'd say that's a big door opener for me.

Paul Right. How did that work for you then Amanda?

Amanda Well, I'm involved in a number of business communities here and so I am well known. You know, I'm quite... there's a programme here in Australia called The Key Person of Influence, which also is abbreviated to KPI [laughs].

Paul [Inaudible 00:45:47].

Amanda Yeah, that's right. So I've done their course a few years ago, and I've actually just re-done it. And so there's people in the KPI community who know exactly who I am. I'm also involved in a number of other business-type communities. Again, they know who I am and I've written the books. So it's about having that profile and presence and being active and generous. S

I go and do... every quarter there's a business group that meets, like 200 people in it or something and I do a round table mentoring on the last day of that conference. It's a Sunday, I do it in my own time... my own time? I do it for nothing. And as I said it's a Sunday. Just because I want to give back. So people who come across me know how generous I am in helping and wanting to help.

You just start to get a bit of a reputation as someone who will go out of her way to help and provide advice, even if there's no money on the table. And then when they really need it, it's kind of a no brainer to say, hey Amanda, can we have a conversation please.

Paul Yeah. So how does that generosity play out when you're in a meeting with a prospect Amanda? You know, that first meeting or the first call or whatever your process is, how does the... you know, you need to give in order to get them to go, yeah, I've got you. How does that play out for you?

Amanda Well, it kind of... I'll say it plays out without me consciously knowing. And when I say that it's... I know that every time I have a meeting, I'm ending up answering questions. I did it when I was in the accounting practice, I still do it. And there is a school of thought that says you should never give away any information in the first meeting until they pay for it. I don't agree. I'm going to because I can't help myself [laughs]. It's just who I am.

If you're sitting there and you're in pain or whatever that is. It's business and let's just say, your cash flow is just a complete disaster. You know, it's no skin off my nose to say, have you done this and have you done that, have you thought about this. And then when you start to get the, oh, I hadn't thought about that then well, okay, why don't you... the first thing I would do is do this, this, this and this because that's going to really help. You know? And you just do it.

To me it's not about saying, well, if you want any answers, you've got to pay me and then I'll start talking to you. Obviously the detail's not there but sometimes it's enough to... I'd another client recently and he hasn't invoiced anything since June, the end of our financial year is June, and he's just suddenly gone and done all of his invoices now in November.

And it's like, well, yeah, that's all fine and good but you are going to have a challenge, potentially, recovering some of that money because some people are going to say, you know what, that was done in July. Forget it, I'm not paying you. And you can chase me to Kingdom Come. My attitude always is, if it takes you five months to invoice me, I'll take five months to pay you because you obviously don't need the money. And I'll hold onto it in my bank account until you jump up and down.

So it's not hard to do that and for me, it's just something I do naturally. So, I'm probably too giving but that's kind of me.

Paul Yeah, well, I asked the question only because it's come out in a number of the other interviews around... and this is, I mean, this is too basic for words really but you know when you go to the supermarket and there's cheese on the cheese counter. You know, you buy... you taste the cheese, you give a bit to your kids and if you like the cheese, you buy the cheese. And if you can't taste the cheese, you're not going to buy the cheese.

So generosity... you're not doing it because you want to sell, you're doing it because you want to do it. You're being generous because it's who you are.

Amanda Yeah, you're doing it because you come from a place of help and I genuinely wanted to help people and I think that's... some of us have that in us and others don't. And I'm certainly, you know, I probably do too much of that to my own detriment. You know? [Laughs].

Paul Yeah, it's... I appreciate... it is coming from the place of I want to help you, therefore I'm going to help you and if we end up being a...

Amanda If I can.

Paul A business relationship, then great. So it sounds as though the quality of the questions you ask are the key to unpicking the issues, the problems and the challenges. What are your view on how important the quality of the questions are?

Amanda So I said okay, fine, I've got a one in three chance of winning that job. It is what it is and I'm not going to get too twisted about that. I always want my fair share in terms of what I think... he came back to me afterwards and said, I would like to work with you so I said, oh, fantastic. And he said, look, I want you to know though, you weren't the cheapest, but you also weren't the most expensive.

He said, you weren't the cheapest. I might have been the most expensive actually. He said, but you were the only one who actually asked questions about my business. And you were interested in what I was going to do. The others just said to me, yeah, certainly, we can look after you. We can do this, it'll cost this. We can do this, it'll cost this, whatever, whatever. He said, you know, you spent an hour with me, you asked me what my plans were. He was actually buying a business. What I'm doing, what my plans are. You actually showed an interest.

He said, I did the same thing for three lawyers. He interviewed three lawyers. And he told me which one he picked and it's hilarious because it's actually the lawyer in the building next door and one that I worked with. And he didn't know that. That wasn't a referral from me at all. He just picked three lawyers in the area and as it turned out... I said, oh, that's hilarious because I know them and they're really good and I would work with them quite frequently.

So, again, there, the person had done the same thing... took an interest in what he was doing, what the plans were. And I think that's the big key. Just being interested, wanting to find... and it is the detail of the questions. When you're just asking the question, asking the next one, the next one, whatever logically flows. Don't ask me what questions I specifically asked, it's not scripted that I must ask this, I must ask that.

Paul Yeah, that was going to be my next question.

Amanda Yeah, I don't. I mean there's the first question, tell me a bit about your business. What's your background, how long have you been doing... just, you know, give me some background, what do you do. Depending on what that answer is...

Paul Yeah, kind of how we started.

Amanda Then you go further into it. You say, okay, what are you looking for, what are the challenges. Why... when it's the accounting question, why are you looking for a new accountant. Blah, blah, blah.

Paul That's great, that's great. And then there's the flip side to the question here is the, sometimes forgotten, is the quality of the listening. What insights would you give me and share on the... wanting to ask questions and then

genuinely interested people and then listen at a deep level. What's your strategy, what's your approach from a listening perspective?

Amanda I guess I do. It's one of these funny things, I'm not very conscious of what I do at that. I just do what I do and I don't know where it comes from, I don't know where I learned it. But, yeah, I do listen. And I will follow up on the next conversation, it doesn't even matter who it is. I think one of the other things is, and it is about the listening, but the other thing is, I am always present wherever I am, whatever I'm doing.

Paul What do you mean by present?

Amanda So, for example, you and I are talking right now. I'm very present in this conversation. My house could fall down around me and I won't even necessarily notice because I'm so focused on the fact that I'm talking to you that there's nothing else in my mind. I'm very present. And I think the value part of the listening is that you're present there.

You're not thinking, oh, I've got to do this, I wish he'd hurry up and finish talking because I need to go somewhere else or whatever. You're just there for that person and everything else is irrelevant. It doesn't matter what other dramas are going on or whatever issues are going on in the background, they're gone, you're focused on that person or people, if you've got multiple people, that meeting, that conversation.

And I think, it's about just remembering stuff from that. I mean, I was trying to get a call with somebody else earlier this week. They were supposed to...

this fellow was supposed to ring me on Monday, it didn't happen, and I thought, oh, okay. That's a bit of a bummer but okay. And then I got an email from his office saying, really sorry, Jim had to... he and the staff were caught up with a health scare with the [Jan 00:57:16] and had been in the hospital dealing with that all day. Okay, no problem.

I did finally speak to him yesterday and the first thing I said to him was, how is your [Jan 00:57:16], is he or she - I wasn't sure who it was, if it was male or female - how are they? And the first part of the conversation was all around that. It was nothing to do with the reason why I had asked him to give me a call.

And it's that stuff that endears you, if you like, for you to pay for... because people go, oh, she actually remembered, she actually took the time to ask about something that has nothing to do with the conversation, but she remembers that's what I said.

Paul Yeah, that's really valuable Amanda. Brilliant.

Amanda You know, part of that is remembering. There's systems for... people say, make sure you know if they take their coffee with milk or sugar or whether they like tea or whatever. Those things will help people to feel loved and wanted and stuff. And not that I don't agree with that but I think this is more the detail of really...

Paul Being a good human being.

Amanda Yeah. And knowing when is the right time to ask about some of those things. Clients... over time, clients tell you a lot. And there are times when it's appropriate to ask after the daughter that's got anorexia and see how it's going and just kind of be there for them. And times when, no, you don't bother. You don't raise it every single time. But just checking it, how's it all going, that was really awful last time... whatever. It's just remembering that stuff.

Paul Yeah. Very good. So it sounds as though you are credible in your spaces partly because of your books, partly because of the business groups you're involved in. I'm presuming you do some speaking as well, Amanda, is that right?

Amanda Yeah. Yes, I do.

Paul So that credibility piece and there's also the intimacy around the relationships is there that you exude to your clients and the generosity that you mentioned as well. What I would like to, in terms of wrapping the call up, my final question to everyone is... you know there's... in all walks of life, there are certain rules of thumb that underpin the effectiveness of what people do.

Whether you be a sprinter, or a trusted business advisor or a plumber. There are certain rules of thumb. And I always remember the carpet fitter coming to the house and he measures up and measures a second time. And I said, what are you doing. And he said, well, one of the rules of

thumb is that you measure twice and cut once. And you go, oh, that's stunning. What are your rules of thumb around establishing, building and maintaining the trust of business advisor relationships with your clients?

Amanda I think the number one rule is to be caring, to be interested in them. And I love business, I love all types of business and I love to know about them. I love getting into the nitty-gritty of what's happening in a business. The numbers are important but they're not everything. And I think my rule of thumb is... really, it is, it's about genuinely being interested in them as a person and their business. And that's where I get the rewards from.

And part of that is, despite what I said about being online, part of that is actually making sure that you go to their business and check it out. Because the other thing that I know... this involves slightly... but that's why my early meetings are face to face, in real meeting... is that the amount of knowledge and comprehension you can get by physically going to a business premise is invaluable in providing any advice.

I do some work with some large agricultural operations and I do go out on sight to the farm. And they have recently bought another one in a completely different location. I have yet to go there and I struggle with the advisory work on that particular farm because I haven't seen it. I say I struggle, I'm fine, but I know that the depth of my understanding of what's going on would be so much better once I've gone up there.

And I have said that to the owner, I've said, I really want to get up to that particular location and he's said, yeah, we will. And I've said, oh, good, because it will really help me to understand what... some of this stuff that

we're talking about will make much more sense to me. So, I think that's part of the key. But it's just...

I guess the other little thing that's behind the scene, and this is me maybe being a little bit cheeky, is that accountants... a lot of accountants don't have much personality. They're kind of that geeky kind of, you know, socially inept, not really good at a conversation. And I'm being a bit generalist here and being unfair to a lot of people obviously, but I think one of the things that makes me really stand out is that I don't fit that mould.

I've got a personality. I'm bright, I'm bushy tailed, I'm interested, I'm keen. I've got a knowledge base that isn't just talking about tax and that sort of stuff. It's just... and I think that is one of the secret sauce in terms of my success is that I think through my early working life, I never quite understood why I didn't fit in the accounting firms I worked for.

I struggled, I mean, it was a job and it was all fine but I never really felt like it was where I belonged. And it took me a lot years to work out why. And I think it's A, that I'm entrepreneurial and B, that I actually have a personality. And that doesn't necessarily fit in well when you're just another person in another cubicle that's churning out accounts and tax returns.

Paul

Sure. I think there's potentially two rules of thumb there and what's come out of this whole conversation is, yes, there's the curiosity piece, yes, there's the personality piece but there's also that learning piece in there, Amanda. You know, you're going after other knowledge other than just accountancy and tax. You've brought that up several times.

And actually it's come up in other interviews as well that the people who are successful and in doing lots of trusted business advisory work are more rounded in their knowledge around business, because they've invested in themselves. Whether it be reading books, doing courses, joining business groups or whatever. And it sounds as if you agree with that process too.

Amanda Absolutely. And I think one of the things... I think that's one of the reasons why a lot of accountants don't do it is because they actually don't have the knowledge. They're scared stupid to actually ask questions of their clients because they think, oh, god, if I ask a question... if I ask them something, they're going to ask me something that I have no flipping idea how to answer. And I'm going to look like the proverbial idiot and I can't do it.

So, I think that's a massive problem. And we don't have that training as accountants, as chartered accountants. Our training is all around financial statements and tax returns, there's nothing about anything else on running a business.

Paul [Inaudible 01:05:44].

Amanda Yeah, that's right. We've been churning out tax returns and that's one of the reasons why I formed my practice. I had actually a really good team in the end, it did take me a while to get there but I had a really, really good team. And at a certain level, I regret it because they were a really good team. But they were tax return type people.

They would churn out financial statements and tax returns. They were very, very good at it but they didn't have the knowledge to do the business advisory. So, you know, if I wanted to expand into it, I kept getting dragged into the clients work which I didn't want to do, the only way to deal with it was to get out of there. But I couldn't see that any of them had any... they didn't have the knowledge and none of them really wanted to learn to do that work. And you can't make that happen.

And it's not necessarily something that you can learn in five minutes either. For me, it's a lifetime of working. I've been a chartered accountant for over 30 years, I've been around for a long time and there's a lot of knowledge that I've gained without really realising over that time period.

Paul I think the highlight for me on this call, Amanda, is that word curiosity. Be curious, be interested, use your language about your clients. But there's also the curiosity about business in general. You know, go and learn. There's something innate about that in... from the way you're describing in. But there's an argument to say, there's nothing stopping anybody, any accountant, whatever their mix, of going out and broadening their business knowledge and who knows, that would pay off anyway.

Amanda No question in my mind, absolutely.

Paul Amanda, this has been brilliant. Thank you very much for investing your whole-hearted self because you've been completely present, to use your phrase, in this call and I found it fascinating. Thank you very much. Very,

very valuable. And I look forward to taking the material that you've shared and making more of it in the book when it comes out next year. So thank you very much.

Amanda Thank you, I've enjoyed it.

Paul Good. Enjoy the rest of your evening.

Amanda And you, enjoy the rest of your day.

Paul Thank you. Bye.