



## Lead with trust: advice from Shopify's Marcie Murray

BY HEATHER HUDSON

Marcie Murray and her team are doing things a bit differently. Murray's approach to running a support team is driven by understanding the values the team can bring to customers, not by laying out a set of rules to follow. Murray is not a rule follower herself, and maybe that's all part of the equation.

As Director of Support for [Shopify](#), the global e-commerce company, Murray leads a support team numbering more than 1,000 people around the world from her team pod in the company's headquarters in Ottawa, Canada. And her leadership style? More of an outstretched hand than an iron fist.

Murray sums up what she values most in peers and team members using 3 C's: composure, compassion, and creativity. "Composure is a form of consistency and reliability; compassion is critical for being around other people; and creativity means elasticity in terms of stretching yourself and your ambition," she explained.

**"I believe trust is not an earned privilege. When you run a remote team, you have to start with it."**

- Marcie Murray, Shopify

[relate.zendesk.com](https://relate.zendesk.com)



Behind her warm and endearing persona is a scrappy problem-solver with relentless, purpose-fuelled ambition. Her recipe for success is messy, based on risk-taking, and a willingness to openly invite failure.

## **Getting started at Shopify**

Like most people with inspiring success stories, Murray didn't know what she was stumbling into when she applied for a Guru position at Shopify almost seven years ago. She was simply following what have proven to be razor-sharp instincts.

"I was a wedding planner, mostly, before I joined Shopify. I built a store on the platform when I was on maternity leave to sell wedding invitation designs," she said.

**Behind her warm and endearing persona is a scrappy problem-solver with relentless, purpose-fuelled ambition. Her recipe for success is messy, based on risk-taking, and a willingness to openly invite failure.**

She had no idea that the company was in her hometown until a friend mentioned it and she did some digging. With fewer than 100 staff members, and only 10 in support, the startup was an appealing option for Murray.

"The values of Shopify are definitely aligned with mine," she explained. "We're built on creating more entrepreneurs and that's something that's rooted in my DNA. My parents, husband, and brother are all entrepreneurs. I would attribute a large portion of my success to having entrepreneurship coursing through my veins."

As front-line customer support, Murray easily identified with her customers, but she thrived on wearing multiple hats as the company continued to explode. She quickly began pitching in on recruitment and training and flexed her planning skills by pulling together a conference.

Soon, she was leading the initiative to take the support team remote, across Canada and into Ireland. By 2016, fresh off a maternity leave, she was promoted to her current role, in which she leads team members in Canada, the U.S., New Zealand, the Philippines, Ireland, and Lithuania.

It's been a sharp and steady rise, which can be credited largely to relying on her wits. "True story: the most education I have comprises of successfully dropping out of two universities. But you don't go to school to become Director of Support," Murray said. "My role is to be deeply connected with people and their attachment as customers. That's not something that's taught, although maybe one day it will be."

## **Trust is key to managing a remote team**

With 98 percent of her enormous team working remotely all over the world, Murray's approach is built on something as simple as it is profound: trust.

"I believe trust is not an earned privilege. When you run a remote team, you have to start with it. This makes a lot of people extremely uncomfortable, but our teams are predicated on trust and communication from day one," she said.

Instead of using scorecards or leaderboards to measure quality, she and her team leads do it mainly anecdotally, through conversation. It should come as no surprise that Murray is intent on building the same sense of openness with Shopify's customers as it does with its employee brand ambassadors.

"We build hub communities because my fundamental belief is that you need a place where people belong. We look for cities that are livable, have high foot traffic and where it's condensed enough that you'll have chances to meet more people who are part of your Shopify community," she said.

Her pride in building a flourishing remote team is an achievement she never takes for granted. "I'm still so floored that I have more than 1,000 smart, ambitious people who are willing to take a gamble on this company that we've built up," she shared. "Gurus tell us that the trust we have for them is palpable even when working from home. That's such a good feeling."

## Who runs the world? Moms.

As a mother to two young daughters, Murray knows first-hand the challenges of balancing motherhood and a career. Take work/life balance: “I’m really not good at it. There are unfortunately times when my kids are sitting at the table eating Kraft Dinner and I’m on my computer responding to emails or Slack messages. But, other times, I’m protective of that time. Over the course of my career I’ve gotten better at distinguishing critical vs. urgent.” She went on to explain, “My husband and I both have busy careers. He took a step back from his a year ago so I could pursue mine. He’s home with our girls a lot of the time. Our strong partnership has been a huge part of my success. Family and friends help out so much, too. It truly takes a village—and a supportive partner, to say the least.”

Despite the hurdles, her experience has led her to a startling insight: mothers have a superpower in the workplace that can’t be replicated. “I’m convinced that moms rewire their brains more than anybody else. I have a deep appreciation for their ability to switch gears.

“Think about it, after maternity leave, you have to relearn and recalibrate at the workplace, all while handling the emotional stress of leaving your kids. I promise you, mothers are the among the strongest people working on your team.”

Murray is intent on seeding Shopify with future female senior leaders by reminding her leads that it’s their job to hire for potential. “I have a strong affinity for investing in women, especially mothers, because I think they’re the gateway to having more female leaders in the future. In 5 or 10 years, someone will have counted on me to hire them so they could take a shot at that aspirational role,” she said. “I have a lot of confidence in the male leaders on my team as well—to participate in the growth of female leads. Some of the best mentors and supporters for me at Shopify have been men. Too often we encounter a debate of women versus men; creating more female leaders isn’t about having less male leaders. Everyone working together to foster gender diversity in leadership is critical.”

“I have a strong affinity for investing in women, especially mothers, because I think they’re the gateway to having more female leaders in the future.”

- Marcie Murray

## Why failure is an option

When Murray was 12 years old, her parents' business went bankrupt. For two years, there was no paycheck, save for the house-cleaning work her mother took on while her dad attempted to rebuild the business from the ground up. It was a defining chapter in her life.

“Not everybody has the gift of seeing their parents lose it all. It gives you resilience and faith that things will be okay if you work at it. And the understanding that you don't get to where you're going without some form of risk,” she said.

Watching her parents rebuild after a failure empowered Murray to take her own risks, try new things, and seek out opportunities without guaranteed success—and like anyone with breathtakingly high risk-tolerance, she's had her share of failures. While she's good at learning from mistakes and moving on, she's the first to admit there's a little scar tissue left over from every one of them. Those scars are valuable because they provide guidance as she's moved forward, reminders to tune in.

“As a lead, you have to be a good proxy for your environment and that includes listening, feeling, and using your intuition. If you're not, any robot could do your job,” she said. “Anything that has been failure I can equate back to ignoring that spidey sense. Trust me, there have been many.”

## Lessons and accomplishments

If a Shopify Guru wants to get on Murray's good side, they might consider offering some constructive criticism. She was delighted when a Guru approached her after a recent presentation to point out that one of her slides was “incomprehensible.”

“That meant the world to me because he felt I was accessible. It means a lot when someone on the front-line talks to me and gives me feedback,” she explained.

Not surprisingly, Murray also feels especially rewarded by the trust Shopify customers put into the solution she helped create. “I understand that when you build something, your identity, blood, sweat, and tears are poured into it. When they come to me and ask me to support it, that's gratifying because I feel they've trusted what I've built to help them build what they're doing.”

Murray believes strongly in offering team members the opportunity to take ownership over their work. As a consummate problem-solver, it's tempting for her to lay out a strategy for each challenge before handing it over to

team members to take on. But she's come to learn that prescribing solutions is not effective long-term.

"People need to be able to identify the problem, the parameters for engagement, the timeline and all the variables. Often, team members are closer to the challenge than their leaders and can act quickly and creatively. I like to create terms together and let them take it from there. We check in with conversations about what success looks like and whether they feel they're getting there," she said.

## Telling it like it is

Being a leader and a professional with a huge appetite for growth has its dark side, too. Murray recognizes that the constant juggling can lead to feelings of inadequacy on all fronts. She admits that she's her own worst critic and is prone to judging herself harshly. But she's developed a tactic that helps her climb out of a spiral of self-doubt—offering herself the same compassion she'd give to her oldest daughter.

"I imagine my daughter in my position when she's older and capable of running the world somehow. There's no way in hell I would say to her the things I tell myself, like 'You're doing a terrible job,' 'You're not good enough,' 'You can't figure out priorities,' 'You're letting everybody down.'"

While she's good at learning from mistakes and moving on, she's the first to admit there's a little scar tissue left over from every one of them. Those scars are valuable because they provide guidance as she's moved forward, reminders to tune in.

Her candor and no-nonsense practicality may be why she was a hit at Zendesk's Relate conference in November of 2018. She spoke on two panels, including a "Women in Leadership" panel where she made an instant connection with Stephanie Dorman of [Mediaocean](#).

"We showed up wearing the same thing, so we had to discuss where we got our jackets and shoes," she joked. "Both of us are straight talkers and are very honest. She felt very accessible to me, and like a kindred spirit in the way she looks for practical ways to change the world, enjoy family time, stay healthy, get enough sleep, and find time to get her hair done."

## Women she admires

Murray is quick to point out that if she's not met you, she's not likely to look up to you. When asked about inspiring women, three came instantly to mind:

- Her daughters' daycare provider, a single mother with the kind of calm, understanding manner she aspires to have. "She's taught my kids about processing and understanding their feelings and they've subsequently taught me with language I didn't have as an adult. I've learned a lot from her about how to be a better parent."
- Suzanne, her coach at Shopify, who maintains an admirable level of composure, curiosity, and compassion. "The ability to articulate my intuition is one of the best skills she's helped me develop. She's so good at putting a concise description to it, finding an action and moving forward."
- Shawna, a long-time friend, is "so badass. She took a job in branding for sports and she doesn't know the difference between a basketball and a hockey pass. She has zero fear when trying anything. She's an excellent role model for the way she hustles. Nothing can take her down."

## On her own time

Like most busy professionals and mothers, "spare" time feels elusive for Murray. She tries to make time for hobbies like cooking and gardening. "I like to think of myself as an amateur chef and horticulturalist but that's extremely aspirational," she laughed. And when it comes to de-stressing, she looks for the closest source of water and dives in—with a deep love for swimming, canoeing, or anything that's outside and related to water. "Ultimately anything we can do as a family will always be my first choice," she said.

And future business ambitions? "I'm really into ethical, sustainable manufacturing. I would love to make that accessible for entrepreneurs. It's the next thing I want to sink my teeth into."

With her track record, anything is possible.