# The ENGINEERING CAREER COACH PODCAST
# SESSION #61
# The Research Behind Engineering Leaders with Melinda Tourangeau

Show notes at: engineeringcareercoach.com/research

**Episode Intro**: This is *The Engineering Career Coach Podcast*, the only podcast dedicated to helping engineers succeed in work and life. This show is hosted by engineering enthusiasts, Anthony Fasano and Chris Knutson. Both are professional engineers who found success early in their careers and now work together to help other engineers do the same. Now, it's show time!

**Anthony:** Hello! This is Anthony Fasano and this is the show for engineers who want to succeed in both work and life. I want to welcome you to today's episode. I want to remind everyone out there that Chris Knutson and I did join forces as we said we are going to. Chris's information has brought into **The Engineering Career Coach** website. If you go to engineeringcareercoach.com, you could see our new website lay out. We've added a new podcast. We've got three videos you could download to help you with your LinkedIn efforts, your communication, also help you to develop your leadership abilities. So check that out and if you have any questions, you can always reach out to us through the 'Ask Us' tab on the new site.

In today's episode, I'm going to interview Melinda Tourangeau who I met at **The Engineering Career Success Summit** where she was an attendee. She was very active. She gave a lot of good value throughout the sessions from the Mastermind session on Thursday through all the regular sessions. She's going to share some characteristics about technical leaderships based on her PhD research. I will formally introduce Melinda in a moment so you get to know a little bit about her background. Before we get into the main segment of our show, I want to take a moment to recognize our sponsor for today's episode.

Are you thinking about taking the 16-hour structural engineering exam this October? If so, PPI just released a new structural engineering reference manual, practice exam, and online review course for the SC exam. They currently have special pre-order and early bird pricing through June. I'll have more information about PPI's new SC review materials a little later on the show.

Alright. Now let me give you a quote related to today's topic to bring us into the main segment of the show and the quote for today is from Steve Jobs. "Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower." Again that's: "Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower."

**Coaching Segment:**

**Anthony:** Alright. So now it's time for our main segment of the show. Let me take a minute to introduce my guest for today.

Melinda Tourangeau is a third-year doctoral student in the Ed.D. Leadership and Learning program at Rivier University. Her area of study is the characteristics of technical leadership, and their relationship to technical professionals, which I find to be extremely interesting. Melinda has a Bachelors degree in Electrical Engineering from the Georgia Institute of Technology, a Masters of Science in Electrical Engineering from the Air Force Institute of Technology, and an MBA from Northeastern University. Melinda spent the first part of her professional career as a software engineer and after obtaining her MBA, she moved into engineering management. She is currently employed as a program manager at Northrop Grumman Corporation.

Melinda, welcome to the show!

**Melinda:** Thank you very much Anthony.

**Anthony:** Very interested to have you. This is a very interesting topic for me. And for those of you out there, we are going to get into, obviously Melinda's background, her research and all the information that we discussed, we are going to summarize and we are going to put out in our website at engineeringcareercoach.com/research. So, keep that in mind. And if you have questions, you can also put them in there and I'll tell you how to do that a little later on.

Alright, Melinda. So, welcome. It's good to have you. It's very nice to meet you at the Summit. I thought you were very active in all the sessions, which is great because it really got people talking and got people going. So, I really appreciate that.

**Melinda:** I was keenly interested myself, Anthony. So likewise, thank you.

**Anthony:** Alright, Melinda. I just introduced you. Obviously you have a lot of varied background, different degrees. You're doing research. Tell us a little bit about your background and kind of take us through your career a bit, how you got from where you started to where you are today.

**Melinda:** Thank you, Anthony. I'd be happy to but first, I must make a disclaimer that I'm here of my own cognizance and anything I say in no way is related to the opinions, impressions, or intentions of my employer, Northrop Grumman Corporation.

**Anthony:** Got it.

**Melinda:** So, my engineering career actually started at the age of 13, when my father realized I had

gifts for Math and Science and he pretty much insisted that I was going to go into an engineering school. So, I threw myself into my studies and managed to get accepted to Georgia Tech and also get a four-year Air Force RRTC scholarship. So, when I went through Georgia Tech, I majored in Lasers and Electro-optics so I got assigned to the research labs in Dayton, Ohio at Wright Patterson Air Force base and I was studying, like I was in Electro-optics for President Reagan's Star Wars. It was pretty exciting.

And then I transferred to Air Force Institute of Technology to study Electro-Optics and Semiconductor Physics, which I also found interesting. But I'll tell you Anthony, I really struggled with feeling satisfied with what I was doing with my career. I was going to work every day but, I really thought something was missing. Nevertheless, I separated from active duty and went to work for Raytheon and then Belair Mobil, when we were doing wireless data over analog cellular. I don't even know if you remember those things. I just dated myself.

But in the late 90's I said, "You know, maybe if I went to Management school and got some management training, I might be able to stay in engineering but become an engineering manager." So sure enough, I attended the High Technology MBA program at North Eastern, graduated in 2000 and immediately went into engineering management at Sun Microsystems.

**Anthony:** So Melinda, let me ask you a question. Where you say that, because I'm sure some of our listeners might be asking this question, because you know often times the question is:  do I want to stay in the technical side of engineering or do I want to get into management? And you know, when you said there, was that I went into engineering management, was that like, was that a career track or a path that they had or was it a certain position? When you say you did that, how did that happen?

**Melinda:** Oh, that's actually a great question Anthony. Well, first of all, I think what precipitated it, again was questioning why I wasn't entirely satisfied with my day-to-day goings to the office. But I would also say then that well, at Sun Microsystems they had two tracks. They had engineering management, which would get you more money and more prestige and honors and so forth. And they also had technical fellow track.

**Anthony:** Okay.

**Melinda:** And once I decided that I wanted to go into management, it was a pretty routine transition. I found it champion, I think that's probably very important. I found it champion at Sun Microsystems and that was six months before I graduated with my MBA. I explained what I wanted to do and then sure enough, once I graduated she hired me as an engineering manager. It was pretty cut and dry for me.

**Anthony:** And I guess the MBA, was that a big help to get into their management track?

**Melinda:** That's a great question too. I'd say personally, it was because, actually this may not surprise you and your listeners but, I had gone all the way through my Masters and engineering and never had a single class in Accounting in Business and Economics. In people, I never had the Psychology class. So, it helped me personally because I really drew out those pieces of the curriculum that were around those things that I had never studied before. But professionally, if I remember correctly, a first level manager needed to have some kind of business acumen, formal business acumen.

**Anthony:** Okay.

**Melinda:** Well, this is a long time ago Anthony. It may have been possible to get promoted from engineer to manager without that, but I'm certain now my MBA helped a great deal.

**Anthony:** Do you remember how you came in contact with the person? Was it through the school or, you said you met them like six months before you got hired, was it just someone that you knew or…?

**Melinda:** Oh, no! It was the manager who hired me at Sun Microsystems while I was interviewing for Systems Engineering position there. I explained to him, "Listen, I am going to work as Assistants Engineer but once I get my MBA, I do want to go into Management." And he started paving the way for that to happen, which I thought was very big of him. And frankly, when I look back on the 50 or so managers I've had in my career, he was one of the three who had an indelible impact on my profession, on my approach to my profession, on the epidemy of leadership. He was just truly exceptional. So, I guess I did luck out in that area.

**Anthony:** Okay. So, now I get it. So basically, you started working at Sun and when you were still doing the MBA. And then once you got that, you moved into the management track.

**Melinda:** Precisely. So then, I got into Engineering Management and maybe this won't come as a surprise to you and your listeners, but I was pretty terrible at it. I mean, even though I had classes now, I had zero experience in leadership, really. So, I started to ponder the dynamics of becoming a good leader. And throughout the decade of the 2000's, I took probably 20 to 25 leadership classes, somewhere geared specifically toward technical leadership, like the one by Blessing and White, which is still being taught today. It is called technical leadership. And then others were just on learning about myself.

But by the time 2010 rolled around, I said: "Yes, this is figuratively worrying and I'm doing okay." As a leader, I really wasn't great Anthony. I started to wonder if maybe I could go back to school and do more. Do more for myself. Do more for the community of engineering managers, who over the decade I have seen some really challenging experiences with engineering managers. I mean, sometimes they are just, it can be really, really destructive. And I said, I want to help this community.

So, I applied to the local university. I was very surprised I got in because this is a program in leadership and learning. It's primarily geared towards academia, K-12, and education. But, I think they accepted me because I have such a different background and they were looking for me to contribute outside the line dots, if you will. So, started my doctorate in September of 2012 and it has been an investment in understanding leadership styles and now, I want to marry that investment with what I know about the population of technical leaders.

**Anthony:** So, was the research focused on leaders in general or actually, technical leaders?

**Melinda:** That's a great question. So, of course I had 12 classes to take for the course work and I did not write any of my papers for those classes on technical leaders. I only wrote about different leadership styles. So now, this marriage is coming together for, strictly for my dissertation.

**Anthony:** So, tell me about some of your initial findings with your research.

**Melinda:** Sure! So, I have been conducting with cot literature review and that basically means you just comb the literature and you use the bibliographies at the end of peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles to launch your search, or rather to advance your search. And you go and find other articles that were quoted in the one you read. And you just read article after article, you read books. Occasionally, you'll come across something on the web that is considered a scholarly peer-reviewed source and you collate all of that information into what's called a literature review.

And what I'd found is that, there is a plethora of information out there for technical professionals on their transition to technical management. So clearly, the community recognized that the transition from professional to manager, technical professional to technical manager, is a very difficult one. But here is the thing, Anthony, that I found most interesting. Most, all of the literature, I'll call it self-help books if you will, I think there's probably a better name for it, most all of that literature is based on experience and observation. In other words, the authors ae they themselves typically technical people and they went through an enormous challenge and so they decided to write about that to have it become a source for people to go to, to learn about what they could expect in the transition from professional manager. And so, what the scholarly community doesn't like about that is that it's not based in research.

**Anthony:** Hmm.

**Melinda:** So, those are my initial findings. There's a lot out there but there is not a lost based on empirical research.

**Anthony:** So, just so I am clear so that the listeners are clear. So, when you started the research, you were focusing on just general leadership styles. That's what you researched. And then as you went deeper into the research, you started focusing on the technical professionals and their

transitions to leaderships. Is that accurate?

**Melinda:** Yes! That's exactly accurate. And that activity Anthony, actually started this past spring with my class, which was basically calling me to order, if you will. They blandly and said that it is now time to declare your research topic. So, over the spring semester, which runs from January through late April, I started to comb for literature for what was going on specifically with technical leadership.

**Anthony:** Okay. Great. So now, you're in the search or now you're trying to seek the empirical results. Is that right?

**Melinda:** Well, that's one of the reasons I'm speaking on this podcast today. There is possibility of empirical research out there on this population of technical professionals and technical leaders. And I cannot figure out why that is.

So I am, first, hoping that the community will touch base with you and let me know if I'm missing anything. But honestly, I've only come across about twelve sources that report on empirical studies that they specifically designed to explore the characteristics and the personalities of technical professionals and/or technical leaders. And there simple has to be more than that out there. I just don't understand why I haven't come across it.

**Anthony:** Yeah. This is definitely interesting. Obviously, something that we do at **The Engineering Career Coach**. We try to help engineers develop a lot of skills that we think that they need to become in order to be great leaders. And I guess one of the questions I'd have for you is, what would that even look like? In other words, if you wanted to measure that and produce these empirical results, is it the success that the leaders had in with respect to their projects, the project sizes? Like how would you actually measure this?

**Melinda:** Oh, that's an excellent question too. So I'll just say that first of all, you need to know, Anthony, that it's taken me three years to understand the answer to that question so I'll probably sum it up in two minutes. The profession of doing research is enormous and somewhat complex. But what I've been studying over the last three years, almost three years, is how to conduct responsible research.

So, to explore the characteristics of technical professionals and technical leaders, I can look at them primarily from a quantitative methodology or a qualitative. I'll explain each one of those. A quantitative methodology would be, I issue a survey. Now, it can't just be any survey. It has to be a survey that has been proven in the community to have constructability, which means that it is measuring what it says it will measure and the results you will get will be suitably standing on their own in terms of their legitimacy.

So, I can issue a survey, in my case I want to use the MLQ5X, Multi-Factor Leadership

Questionnaire, which is a 20 to 30 question survey. So, it will probably take you about 30 minutes and the questions are the notorious 0 to 4, 0 being never and 4 being always. And what it does is it generates a numerical value for mean and standard deviation and then you could apply statistical analysis to that data to see where your population rounds.

**Anthony:** Okay.

**Melinda:** So, that would be the quantitative portion of empirical study. The qualitative is the piece that probably most engineers and scientists will cringe at, but this is the piece where social science has made its mark on the world. You can glean meaningful information from people by qualitative research. Examples of qualitative research are semi-structured interviews, observation, ethnographic field study; which is that you don't declare to them, we are getting into some ethnic issue here, but essentially, you have the mirrored wall and the cameraman and where you don't tell them that they're being watched. That gets into some ethical issues.

But, the point is that this qualitative approach generates a much more personal and deeply meaningful aspect of what these people are experiencing when they're going through whatever it is that you're studying. So, the other piece of my research will be a qualitative portion where after the technical leaders respond to the quantitative survey, I'll interview a handful, it's called a power-sampling of their direct reports, and find out if the perceptions and impressions of their direct reports match up to what the survey says they're good at.

**Anthony:** So you're going to have their own input essentially, which is them filling out a survey and then, you're going to get input from the people around and you're going to see how the two line up?

**Melinda:** Precisely. My hypothesis is that certain leadership styles which are purported to be extremely successful in multiple categories and multiple populations and multiple industries and all that; I'm not really sure if that's working for Sheldon and Lanyard.

**Anthony:** Okay.

**Melinda:** Well, this is getting into probably where our conversation is going, is what do I plan to do with the results?

**Anthony:** Right.

**Melinda:** The community constantly demands frameworks, theory, models, and constructs to help capture what is going on in the dynamics of people interaction. And what I'd like to do is see what's called, Anthony, a center for technical leadership established in this country. I realize that's a bit ambitious. But, I think that this field is so large and the industry needs technical leadership to be superior in every category. I think this would be actually be something that would be very welcomed

in the community at large.

And then what we could do, Anthony, is we could have an annual symposium where thousands of people attend and then, we will have people like myself presenting their research on the technical community and we will continue to learn and contribute best practices and enhance the pedagogy around how we are taking technical professionals, engineers and scientists, and making them technical leaders.

**Anthony:** That's awesome. Yeah. I mean, listen, the world faces a lot of big challenges that are going to be have to be solved by technical professionals, which means that there is going to have to be technical leaders involved. And there is no doubt that we need to develop those leaders positively in a way where they could be both technically savvy and skilled, but also lead people. I think that's where you're getting at here.

I think, one question I had for you before we kind of wrap up here is, you talked about the quantitative and qualitative analysis or approach to the leaders that you're going to be studying or looking at in your research, and is that something that you will do like on a one-time basis or is it something that you would do it and then do it again in the later time? Or is the empirical study really the matching up of the quantitative and the qualitative? Is that what the results are?

**Melinda:** Well, if this population is going to be studied either by myself or others, which has been already and will continue to be, those are the two primary methods by which they will be studied. So, whether I do it again or not, it depends where my career takes me after I graduate. But, I certainly may.

**Anthony:** Hmm. Yeah. I guess what I'm getting at is, what you're providing, it seems to me like in the research is you take a look at these technical leaders and you're saying, "Okay, let's do this quantitative analysis and let them answer these questions. And then let's do these qualitative analysis and interview their peers and let's see how the two match up." Which will certainly be interesting and they might tell you something about themselves and how they think of themselves as a leader versus how other people think of them as a leader.

And I think what would be even more interesting, which is probably on the lines of what you talked about, was if there was ever some center developed or a training program developed for technical professionals, and then they took the training and they did the quantitative and qualitative analysis again, I think that would be really interesting to see the difference.

**Melinda:** Precisely. So, I think I understand better now. The population clearly is evolving. Industry is impacting how it's evolving and curriculums and higher education schools are impacting and you're impacting Anthony, with your **Engineering Career Coach** website and forum.

So, a good next study is called a longitudinal study. When you separate the study of a population by a period of time, at that point you want to control for intervening variables and you just want to measure how they've changed as a result of certain variables.

**Anthony:** Yep.

**Melinda:** So, I definitely see us continuing to study this population using the exact method I did as part of the longitudinal study or just to study other aspects of it, like team performance for example, or physical performance, if you will, or team work. You could study it in a number of ways. And I'll just add that I find the community for education, how we teach people; if you look back in the last 150 years, has been developed by what people have defined we need to know. Not what where people are coming from.

And so, a lot of the reason I'm doing this research is because I want to understand if the current pedagogy out there, all the workshops, all the training, all the classes you may take in your higher level education classes; is that really being effective? And that's why I want to continue to study this and that's probably where the research will go after I finish this dissertation.

**Anthony:** Yeah. I mean, listen, to me it sounds like if I'm an engineer who is an up and coming engineer or already in a leadership role, I mean this sounds like this is the information that I would want to know about myself. You know, how do I see myself as a leader essentially versus how the people around me see me as a leader. And obviously, what I'd care most about is people around me see me as a leader because of the people I'm leading. I certainly think it's fascinating. How can we at **The Engineering Career Coach** help you with this research in any way?

**Melinda:** Oh well, thanks for asking! So, the first piece is that if there are any listeners out there who are aware of empirical research reports that are considered peer-reviewed and scholarly journal sources, so it has to be legitimate research, not based on research. Now, it really needs to outline the methodology that you used, describe the demographic of the population, etc. I am keenly interested in having those sources in my possession.

So, the first way is, if you please let Anthony know what that source is, you can provide it via APA citation or any formal citation where I could find it myself in our library. And then the second way Anthony, is that in order to do this survey, this study, I'm going to need about a 100 technical leaders to participate and take the MLQ5X. So, I am looking for a population.

**Anthony:** Okay.

**Melinda:** And I do have, one option of course is my employer, but I am keenly interested in seeing if I could perhaps get a wider demographic by soliciting the people who may be participating in your forum or their bosses or themselves. Technical leader is simple someone who has a Bachelors

and/or a Masters degree in Engineering or Science and is now a first level manager, second level manager, all the way up to director, vice president, and president.

**Anthony:** Okay, awesome. So, if you're listening and you're either in that position or you have a boss or a supervisor who's in that position, or a colleague and you think that they might be interested in taking this survey, please email me afasano@engineeringcareercoach.com or simply go to engineeringcareercoach.com. You can always get into touch with us through the 'Ask Us' or 'Contact Us' pages and let's try to help Melinda out here and I'm sure you will learn something about yourself in the process as well.

**Melinda:** Yes. I do want to add, Anthony, that anyone who participates via the survey will get their results back. So, you will be doing a 360. The MLQ5X does call for a self-assessment as well as asking your peers and your subordinates and even your own manager to reply to this survey. So, it is somewhat of a commitment but you will get your results back. And you will know how transformational you are, how transactional you are, how positive you are, how charismatic you are.

**Anthony:** That's awesome because I think that's very valuable information for you as an engineer to know that much about you. That's a very well-known assessment that a lot of people use to invest in, to give to their employees, etc. So, if you have access to that, I think it will be awesome. And I highly recommend you take advantage of this opportunity, if you are interested in learning more about yourself.

So with that, I'm going to keep Melinda on with me here. We are going to jump into the Take Action Today segment of the show where we try to give you one piece of actionable advice that you can take and implement into your engineering career today.


**Take Action Today Segment:**

**Anthony:** Alright. Now it's time for our Take Action Today segment of the show. Melinda is going to share with you one piece of actionable advice today. I'm going to hand it over to her in a minute. Before I do though, I'd like to just take a moment to offer a word from today's episode's sponsor.

The structural engineering SC exam has one of the lowest pass rates of all exams based on the exam statistics on the NCEES. That shouldn't deter you though. To help you prepare, PPI has just released brand new edition of their structural engineering reference manual and their buildings practice exam. Both were updated to the new 2015 exam codes. You can pre-order both books now at PPI website for 20% off. I also recommend that you check out their brand new 60-hour online review course for the SC exam that begins this July. With early bird registration, you can save $470 on the course package through June 10.

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Alright. So with that, let me kick it over to Melinda. Melinda, what kind of actionable advice can you give to the listeners today?

**Melinda:** It's going to sound a little bit cliché maybe, but it's really this: you really need to listen to what your mind and your heart are telling you when you start to wonder if you're cut-out for engineering management. It is a legitimate transfer of career and I implore all of you, if you're thinking about it to continue ask yourself why, continue to ask yourself what you want to do with the profession once you get there. Is your goal going to be great leadership? Is your goal going to be great performance? Because you're working on a particular product and you want to see that things succeed over everything else. Just follow that instinct to leave raw technical work and go in to management, if that's what you want to do.

But, a word of advice. It is virtually difficult to impossible to maintain the depth required for the technical work that you're doing and stay with that as an identity in your management career. You are going to be leaving behind the very thing you've probably invested ten, fifteen, twenty years of your life in and that might feel a little scary, but the investment you make, once you've made it and you've moved into management, you're probably going to be very surprised at how much more satisfied or very satisfied in a different way you're going to be as an engineering manager. It really is a very rewarding place to be.

**Anthony:** That's great. And that's really one of the questions I get the most from engineers is, how do I decide if I want to stay in to technical or out, or if I want to go into the managerial path. And I always give an answer similar to what Melinda just gave, is that you have to do what you're passionate about. If you're passionate about the technical side, you love it, you want to focus mainly on technical calculations, technical challenges, technical issues, guidelines, codes, etc.; then you know, you stay in the technical path. If you like leading people, leading projects, coordinating with clients, and going to meetings and making presentations, and doing a lot of these leadership type of activities, then you know, you're going to want to look into the path of engineering management.

I think, the one thing that sometimes in unfortunate in today's world is that, it seems to be a lot of pressure for people to go into management as part of like a general progression on to your engineering career. And I tell engineers you know, it's okay if you don't want to and I know sometimes the company puts a lot of pressure on you, so you know, maybe that means you need to make a change, I don't know. But the point is, there are opportunities to stay in the technical role. You may

just have to find the right one.

**Melinda:** I'd say resistance is not futile in that regard, Anthony.

**Anthony:** Yeah, exactly. So, just be aware that there are opportunities out there for staying on the technical track and maybe the company you're with doesn't want to offer you one or they're trying to push you in the direction you don't want to go but that's something you've got to address but, that doesn't mean you've to accept it. I guess that's what I'm trying to say. So…

**Melinda:** Right. And I'd just add that the last thing that we would want is Sheldon to be our boss. So, no offense to Sheldon. I love the show, Bing Bang Theory. It's great. But, you really want to be sure that this is something that you want to do because you don't have to study new skills and new abilities to be good at it. And you want to have a positive impact on the people that you're going to be leading. Just like you yourself would like to get that from your technical manager, right?

**Anthony:** Yeah, absolutely. And I think that one thing that this whole episode may be reinforces and I think what Melinda's research reinforces is that, becoming an engineering manager is not something where you just flick the switch and you just do it. It takes time and it takes effort. You have to do study. You have to improve yourself. You have to improve certain skills. It's not just as easy as picking between the two pads. And I think, sometimes, because a lot of engineering managers don't get training, like Melinda said earlier, they just kind of get thrust into management because it's just the next step for them; they are not able to progress. They are not able to become a great leader. And when they get that qualitative feedback, it may not be very good and that the reason is because they were just kind of told to go that path. They weren't given any training. They weren't told how to improve.

And that's obviously one of the things that we try to do at **The Engineering Career Coach**, is give you some of those skills and help you to improve those skills. But the take away home for you is that if you want to go into engineering management, you're going to need to work at it. You're going to need to improve yourself. You might not go get a Masters degree for it, although there are some, but even if you don't do that you still need to take steps to improve it.

**Melinda:** Right.

**Anthony:** So with that, Melinda, thank you so much for coming on this show. I really appreciate it.

**Melinda:** Oh, you're very welcome Anthony. It's been great. Good luck to all of you out there with your careers. I strongly recommend following your dreams and your skills and talents. And if you like people, think about management.

**Anthony:** Awesome. Alright. I hope you enjoyed the episode today. We would love to hear feedback,

comments and any questions you have, go to www.engineeringcareercoach.com/research. We will monitor the comments and if there are questions for Melinda, I'll make sure she gets a hold of them and try to answer them or get you some information. And remember, if you want to take the assessment and be part of the research, just email me at afasano@engineeringcareercoach.com. Until next time, please continue to engineer your own success.

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