EPISODE 44 – Larissa Schultz

Interview Transcript

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Tom: Folks I'm on the line with Larissa Schultz, the founder and owner of LJS Meeting Strategies. Larissa, welcome to the show!

Larissa: Thank you so much.

Tom: Thrilled to have you here because you're known as an advocate for education in the event industry. I'm really excited to talk with you, and I know our audience will get a lot from this conversation. Larissa, I'd like to start by asking you a couple of questions that were sent in by Gina, who's one of my listeners. She's considering a career path in event planning. And I'm curious, when you started, was event planning your career of choice, or did you have other interests that you wanted to pursue?

Larissa: That's a great question, and honestly when I started in the event planning world, meeting planning as it stands today, did not exist. It was generally a job that was done or a task that was done as an aside to other positions. Executive assistants, administrative assistants, human resources offices may have handled the meeting planning for organizations. So when I started I was completely clueless on how to start planning meetings and events, and I was in a similar position as Gina was where I had to start asking questions and trying to find resources on how you do events.

Tom: How did you come to the decision that event planning was the right thing for you?

Larissa: Well, luckily early in my career, I was focused working for an organization in their contracting department, and I did enjoy that, but I was also somebody who had creative ideas and wanted to travel and do bigger things. I met an individual at the company who managed the travel department and also oversaw the meetings and events. She kind of took me under her wing, thought I would be a good fit for the job, and really mentored me into the position. It was when I actually started doing the job full time on my own that I realized, wow, there are so many opportunities, so many avenues within this industry. I want to learn more. I need to learn more.

I want to go further and farther. So that's about when it happened, about 20 years ago. I spent a lot of time working for other companies and organizations, which I think is key, before I went out on my own. One, you get the benefit of being paid while you're learning. So those organizations not only helped me learn what event planning was, but some of them even paid for me to attend event planning classes, webinars, those types of things. Two, you can formulate a lot of networking opportunities when you work with other organizations and get to know people. I always say if you want to go into event planning and be
an independent planner, learn first. Get paid while learning first and then step out on your own.

Tom: Well, that's an excellent answer because that actually answered a couple of her questions. I really, really do appreciate that. Now if somebody was going in...when you said you started, event planning wasn't a thing. It was something that was part of the job. Was that something that came up before or during the say interview process, or was that something you found out once you got into the job?

Larissa: It was actually something I found out once I got into the job. I was aware of what this individual did within the company, but I did not realize how much tactical skills, how much details, how much processes, how much forms, all of those types of things go into an event before I met with her and before I started to learn more about the job. A lot of people, and I was naive at the time too, they think that there’s someone you can call and just everything gets arranged, but it really doesn't work that way.

Tom: That would be wonderful wouldn't it?

Larissa: Wouldn't it?

Tom: Well, they can call you now.

Larissa: Yeah, I was going to say now we do have event planners out there than they can call and everything does get arranged.

Tom: So if somebody was interested in pursuing this as a path, should they get some experience before they go out to…? And how do they start with the experience? Would you recommend they start with a company? Would you recommend they start with an event vendor like a caterer? How would you recommend somebody get started in this?

Larissa: Really the industry has moved and grown so far within the past 20 years, so I would recommend that somebody who's interested in event planning start to get educated in the event planning world. There's a lot of different courses and programs out there. There's certificate courses they can take. There's community college classes they can take. Now we even have universities that are offering four year degrees in hospitality management with event management as a component. I would say find something that you can gain some initial education on and then look to network during that process. Try to start out as a junior coordinator in an organization, or even work in the hotel side of things to start to see how that portion of the hospitality industry works.
Tom: Do you believe that a college degree is important to have in the hospitality industry, or do you think...is there another degree that might benefit them as well? Or is a degree even needed?

Larissa: In my opinion, a college degree is not necessarily needed to work in the hospitality industry. I think the college degree does provide other benefits that's more of a well-rounded educational process and does allow you to see things a little differently, but I definitely think you can be very successful without a college degree.

Tom: So what kind of skills would you say that a company who's hiring someone that's going to plan events would be looking for?

Larissa: There's a lot of different skills that would come into play. The first one I can think of is time management. This job, this career, you definitely have to manage your time well because that event date generally does not move. You have to kind of back into that date and make sure that you get everything done in time for the event to happen. I think also project management would be a good skill to have, that you can manage multiple projects and understand how in order to complete part C you need to get A and B done, but at the same time that C is going on, F and G may get started.

Just understanding the different layers and levels that come into a project such as event. Lastly, I think a lot of companies are really looking for somebody who understands finances and can understand budgeting, budget parameters, budget controls, and that aspect. Events can be very costly, and some events even need to generate revenues. Understanding how revenues and expenses work is a key to the success to be an event planner.

Tom: Well, that's some great information, Larissa. I really appreciate you sharing all that. When you started...what year did you start LJS?


Tom: Okay, and were there any surprises you encountered when you were starting your company?

Larissa: I found out that when you own your own business, you actually become a business owner and not necessarily an event planner. There's just a lot that goes into being an entrepreneur and owning your own company. You have to manage human resources, IT, finances, all of those different aspects.
Business development, marketing. When you work for an organization as an event planner, when I did, I just was able to plan events.

Tom: Okay. Now I've got to ask you, if you were going back and starting over again, is there anything that you would have done different that would maybe have advanced your career or made it a little bit easier on you?

Larissa: Wow, that is a great question. I'm one that I don't necessarily look in the rearview mirror and think, "Oh, I wish I would have done this." I definitely wish, in regards to my strategic career, I think I wish I would have spent a little bit more time doing the 5, to 10, to 15 year plan, because now I'm 20 years in the industry and I'm looking at the rest of my career going, "Now what? Now what do I want to do?" And maybe if I had looked at this 10 years ago, I could be on a better path to figuring out the next 10 years from now.

Tom: Okay. Good advice for anybody out there who's going down this path. Today I want to talk to you about the education that you provide for other event planners. You are a college professor, is that correct?

Larissa: That is correct. I am an adjunct professor at a local community college, Glendale Community College in Los Angeles.

Tom: And you teach the students about event planning?

Larissa: I do. One of my courses that I teach is event management and meeting planning.

Tom: And you've also presented I guess keynotes or workshops for event planners such as MPI, correct?

Larissa: Correct.

Tom: One of the things I want to talk about today is you have a speech that's "Event Planning Vitals: Starting at the Core." You try to help people that are new or people who want a refresher with the basics of the event.

Larissa: Correct. And by basics, it's really kind of the tactical skills. There's a lot that goes into event planning from a strategic level, but when you start out at the basics, you want to understand the tactical skills. It's also starting to understand the vernacular, and the industry terms, and the words, and the definitions.

Tom: What are the vital components of an event?
Larissa: To me, in my opinion, there are some basic vitals of an event that you would see in any event, and that includes goal setting and objectives, planning which is really the start of it. There's no way you should be holding an event if you don't know why you're holding the event and what you're trying to achieve by holding the event. So you really need to start with goal setting and objective setting and understanding how that can be very complex. It can also be very simple at the same time. Just understanding that you need to create SMART objectives: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-delineated objectives, and make sure those are always the focus during the entire planning process.

Also I cover request for proposals. We call it "RFP" in the industry, but requests for proposal really occur in any industry. How to create them, how to write them, who to send them to, how to review them, and how to really make sure that the vendors that are bidding on your event have the information that they need to provide quality bids. We also cover the basics of site selection and site inspections when it comes to venues or vendors and reviewing the options, helping you narrow down all the different bids you've received to select the venue or the vendor that you're working with. Also covering contracts and negotiations. That is a basic and contracts are definitely a requirement in any event that you plan.

Then we cover meeting logistics and room setup. How is the room set up, the environment within which you're creating for the attendees? Food and beverage is another element that we cover. The basics of food and beverage, menu planning, how your food and beverage budget can easily exceed your budget or make or break your program. Then also included I touch on audiovisual and production, which is everything you need to hear and see the event and the content that you're providing. Also we touch on third party vendors which can be anything from decor companies, to transportation companies, to airline charters, etc. Lastly we cover the budget and billing aspects. How you budget for an event, how to maintain a budget, how to monitor the budget. Those to me are really the basics of any event that you would need to touch on.

Tom: Now, are there any different aspects for different events? If you were to say hold a convention, would there be different aspects than holding just a single meeting? Are there any changes I guess is what I'm trying to say?

Larissa: Yeah, there definitely are. Each type of event that's out there...you have such events as a special event which is generally just kind of a one time three to four hour...a wedding is an example of a special event, or a gala dinner might be an example of a special event. Then you have meetings which are
really used to conduct business. Generally with a meeting, there's no exhibit component, no trade show components. If you move into a convention, generally with a convention you have many more people than you do a meeting. There's also an exhibition/trade show component to that.

So when you move into handling those size of events, you really have to then start to learn about exhibition companies and drayage companies, and that's a whole additional level that comes into play in the educational process of an event planner. Also there's conferences which are not held on a regular basis, generally smaller groups, definitely used for good brainstorming. There's a lot of different levels that as you learn more about the different types of events out there, you need to increase your education on what comes into play for those events.

**Tom:** Now, let's define something once. You mentioned drayage. I'm not sure that if we have beginning event planners, they're going to know what that is.

**Larissa:** Well, and that's one of the reasons why for beginning event planners, it's not a topic I usually touch on, just because to really get into conventions, and large exhibitions, and working with drayage companies, generally they're drayage companies and they handle your shipping and warehousing of materials that come in for exhibitions. To me, learning about drayage, and exhibitions, and trade shows is a level up from just the basics.

**Tom:** Okay, so progression. You don't want to definitely jump in over your head, yes.

**Larissa:** Progression.

**Tom:** So as you started, you mentioned that you start with the goal setting and the objectives, and you want SMART specific objectives. Can you give us an example, and I mean this is going to be pulled right out of your hat here. Can you give us an example of an objective and maybe some ideas on how they would incorporate that?

**Larissa:** Yes, so let's say you have a goal that you want to hold a sales incentive trip for the top 10 sales people in the company. One of the objectives that you might put into play, and generally I say two to three objectives is good. One of the objectives you might be working with your key stakeholders which could be the senior executive team would be, the objective is to hold a sales meeting in the fall with 50 attendees that will recognize the top 10 sales people who achieved $50,000 in revenue during the 30 day spring sales campaign.
That's an objective that does affect the meeting, but it kind of sets the parameters with who's going to be attending, how they get to attend, and what they need to achieve in order to be in attendance. It's specific, it's measurable. You can measure did 50 people attend? You can measure did the top 10 sales people who attended achieve that revenue goal you set? It is achievable. You've determined that, yes, you can get 10 people to do that in 30 days. It's realistic and then it is time-delineated. You've set when the markers need to happen and when the event will occur.

**Tom:** You mentioned the request for proposals. What goes into a request or what is something that maybe some people leave out that they really ought to have in there so that the vendors can make educated proposals or bids on their event?

**Larissa:** When it comes to request for proposals, I think one of the key things we're seeing right now is, and this amazes me, no due dates. A lot of event planners forget to let the vendors know when the proposal is due. Also the other thing is not having realistic due dates. Nowadays we are inundated and a lot of the supplier vendors are inundated with request for proposals. So asking a vendor or supplier to receive a proposal and turn it around in 24 hours really is not realistic. You need to allow your vendors some time to put together a quality bid. If you allow them 72 hours even to a week, which seems very long, but if you allow them that much time, you're gonna have a vendor who's really looking at your proposal, spending some time, being focused on it, and really providing you the information that you've requested.

**Tom:** Now when somebody goes over a proposal...I'm just gonna ballpark here. I'm assuming you wouldn't recommend they necessarily go for the lowest bid.

**Larissa:** That is not...yeah. In my opinion, you get what you pay for. You may need to go for the lowest bid if it's a budget concern. However, generally when I review proposals I look at it from an aspect of did they follow the guidelines that I set? Did they get the proposal in on time? Did they answer all of the questions? Because I've already...in this day of technology, you've already somewhat vetted through your suppliers and vendors. You've done a little research. You've reviewed their websites. You may have contacted a couple people, so you already kind of know what companies you are really interested in.

Then you're going to start going through and doing the comparison based on...and number one for me is will they help me meet my objectives which I've set? That's number one. Two, what is the budget price, and how is it comparable to the other bids that are out there? And then three, is this gonna be
a quality vendor relationship that we can maybe have a long term relationship working on other events together?

**Tom:** I think that's probably one of the keys there is you definitely want to work with people that are going to support you and that you are going to enjoy working with.

**Larissa:** That's true, very much so.

**Tom:** Now when we get down to the meeting logistics and the room setups, what kind of things do you consider when you're setting up a room?

**Larissa:** There's a lot of things to consider when you're setting up a room. Number one is what are your objectives of the event? What are you trying to achieve? Then you're going to mirror the room setup that's going to help you meet those objectives. If you're conducting an educational session, you want to make sure that your attendees are comfortable. Knowing that generally you might be working with adult learners, adult learners learn in all different ways, and so you want to make sure that you maybe offer multiple different types of seating just depending on the individual needs. You need to look at such things as lighting, sound, flow of traffic, the feel of the room. You really need to, and this is the importance of the site inspection, you really need to get a feel, the five senses of what that room feels like, because that's what your attendees are going to be experiencing during your event.

**Tom:** Now what do you look for when you're doing a site inspection?

**Larissa:** About 18 pages worth of stuff. There's a lot that gets covered. If you're looking at a venue, you're doing a site inspection based on what's the surrounding area. You're really looking at the venue from, if it's not local, from flying into the airport, to getting to the venue, the surrounding area. Were the staff friendly when you walked in? Is the space clean? Does it smell? Do you see people happy having a good time? You're looking at sleeping rooms, if you're going to use the meeting spaces, public spaces. The list literally goes on and on on things that you're looking at. You're also looking at things of safety and security. Do they have present security staff on site? The list truly does go on and on and on.

**Tom:** I appreciate you mentioning the security because in episode 43 I talked with Jason Webber who talks about active shooter protocol and event safety, and that just opened up a whole thing for me. Man, there's so many things that event planners have to do and think about. When you're putting together a
program, what do you do when you're looking for speakers? Do you have a specific way you handle that?

**Larissa:** It depends on the client at this point. Sometimes the client knows which speakers they want to bring in. They may know the content of the program agenda a little bit better. I can also provide recommendations. There's some speakers that I know just being involved in the speaking circuit. Then I also look to speaker's bureaus. That's a great option, opportunity that you can look at speaker's bureaus to provide recommendations. They have well-named speakers. They also have up-and-coming speakers. The great thing about working with speaker's bureaus is they can handle the contracting for you and also just the discussion on travel, logistics, and those types of things. It takes a level of pressure of you that they can manage that process.

**Tom:** Larissa, everybody in the event industry at one point or another has a horror story, okay? I've got to ask. Has there ever been something, either at an event you've planned or at an event you've attended, that went horribly wrong. If so and you were planning it, how did you deal with it and what did you learn from it?

**Larissa:** Oh my gosh, there's so many stories. I think one of the things though...and I guess I have two parts to this answer. The first is, and I don't know if it was horribly wrong, but it was one of those events where it was held in Los Angeles, and it was a three day meeting that had a gala dinner installation where we installed our incoming board leadership. We were in the middle of the event. It was day two of the event. The installation was that night. We were preparing everything in the ballroom. It was about 3:00 in the afternoon and the event was going to start at 7:00. One of the individuals who was being installed had a relationship with the governor of California.

Somehow the governor decided to come to his installation. So all of a sudden everything changed. At 3:00 we had 4 hours to go, and I needed to meet with his security team. We had to rearrange the service of the food. We had to rearrange the service of the schedule for the evening. And so it was one of those that with great team members and fast-acting decision making, we were able to really switch everything around and be able to provide a safe environment where the governor could attend, but still also achieve that installation and that celebration of the leadership.

**Tom:** Now everybody's been to an event that just rocks. Everything seems to go right and the people feel so much a part of the event. It almost becomes family. Have you ever been a part of one of those maybe as attendee or as a
planner? I'm sure all your events are great, but is there one that just stands out in your mind? If so, what really made it pop for you?

**Larissa:** Actually one just occurred for me the beginning of April. I worked with a client on a three day country music festival held in Las Vegas, and I managed the festival for them. I worked with them to oversee the whole management part of the festival. We just walked away from a phenomenal, three day, outdoor event with 54,000 fans over the three days. The one thing that it was so great for both the team behind the scenes working and for the attendees was I believe because of the teamwork and the relationships that we created with all of our vendors, and suppliers, and security team, and the city of Las Vegas. We needed all of them to make it happen. All of us just worked together to ensure a great event.

**Tom:** I've got to ask. You've written a couple of books. One of them is "TSA and Me: A Lighthearted Look at Travel Today." Tell us a little about this because this is so far removed I believe from your event planning?

**Larissa:** It is far removed from my event planning, and actually "TSA and Me" was more of a cathartic release. I was working for an organization as an event planner. I was planning multiple events, managing a department of three. I was on the road about 175 days out of the year on business. I was in the airport a lot, and it happened right when the Transportation Security Administration implemented the liquid ban. I was just getting so frustrated because I was in and out of the airports and everything was always changing and it was always different every time I went in all the different airports I went to. So I just started kind of a diary of my experiences just to kind of release that anger and that frustration. Somehow, the powers that be, it just kind of turned into a book.

**Tom:** I've gotta get hold of that. I haven't read it yet, but I'm definitely gonna go to your site and get it. You've also written some other books on event planning. "Event Planning Basics" and "Meeting Planning Basics." Are they designed for the beginner, or do they have information for people who are already in the business as well?

**Larissa:** There's a lot of information. For those two books, they're very similar. One was originally written specifically for administrative professionals who have the job...they have a job as an administrative professional, but then they have to sometimes do this side job of event planning. What I had done and how that stemmed is when I was receiving my master's degree from UNLV, I did a literature review for my thesis. I reviewed all of the current events "planning guides" that were out there all the way from the Convention Industry Council's planning guide to "Event Planning for Dummies." I just kind of reviewed what
was there and came to the realization that if I'm an administrative professional, there's not something that's quick, and fast, and easy that I can just use as a checklist to make sure I've covered all my bases and covered the basics because I already have a full time job.

That's how "Meeting Planning Basics" culminated was to create that simplified checklist for administrative professionals. Then "Event Planning Basics" was then expanded a little bit for those who have been in the industry three years or so, just to make sure that they're covering the basics, they're not forgetting things, and it's really just a checklist.

**Tom**: Okay, great stuff, and they're both available on your site, is that right?

**Larissa**: At this point they are out of circulation.

**Tom**: Oh no!

**Larissa**: I know. I need to work with my publisher to get them reprinted, so hopefully I will have them up soon.

**Tom**: Okay...well.

**Larissa**: They were too popular.

**Tom**: You've gotta get those back out there, Larissa. You've gotta do it. Larissa, before we get out of here, I gotta ask, if you were talking to somebody who is interested in going down this career path and is just starting out, what advice would you give them?

**Larissa**: Number one, I would give them the advice of understand that everything's going to be okay even when it seems like it's not. Number two, trust your team. Make sure you're surrounded by a good team because as an event planner, you cannot do this alone. It's not a one person job. You need vendor partners. You need colleagues. You need staff. You need a team to really help you do an event.

**Tom**: Larissa, this has been a lot of fun today, and I know you also have a talk about cross-cultural topics. I'm hoping that sometime in the future we can get together and talk about that.

**Larissa**: I would love that. I think now with the global economy the way we see it and with a lot of international meetings and events occurring, talking about cross cultural studies, and experiences, and communications, and
negotiations specific to events I think is a crucial tool that a lot of event planners need to know about.

**Tom:** Well, then I'll definitely try to set up something where we can talk about that, but I don't want to hold you up too long today. If somebody's interested in reaching out to you, how can they learn more about you and your company?

**Larissa:** The best way to learn more about me and my company is to check out my website which is ljsmeetingstrategies.com. On it you can find out information about speaking I offer, training that I offer. There's also links to my Twitter account and my Facebook page.

**Tom:** Excellent. Larissa, I really hope that at some point our paths cross because I'd like to meet you in person. This has been a lot of fun. Thank you so much for coming on the show today.

**Larissa:** Thanks, Tom. I greatly appreciate it. I've enjoyed it too.