

Meet topbird, helping women to be at the top of their game

As part of our quick fire questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Katherine Grice and Christie Jennings, cofounders of topbird about building a positive, supportive and fun community to create equality and parity in the workplace.

[Christie] We met at drama school and have been friends for over 30 years. We've had similar career paths, for the past 20 years both of us have had successful careers as facilitators and coaches, but the opportunity to work together had never come up. Katherine travelled all over Europe delivering workshops working with a huge variety of clients and I spent my time working within the senior civil service and the NHS.

[Katherine] At the beginning of the pandemic, we were sitting with a glass of wine each wondering what would happen to our world of work. We were both very concerned that we wouldn't be able to deliver our own brand of practical training if we couldn't be face to face in a room with people. Then, of course like most people, we learned to adapt and ended up developing ways of running practical and fun workshops on Zoom.

[Christie] During lockdown, on those endless walks, we talked about the potential of working with clients online creating a community, where women from all walks of life could learn all about creating equality and parity in the workplace. We wanted it to be supportive, challenging but most importantly

fun.

[Katherine] We decided to call it *topbird* because that's exactly what we want – for women to be at the top of their game, to spread their wings and fly.

Tell me about the business – what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

[Christie] topbird is a training and coaching consultancy that focuses on women in business. We are passionate about supporting, encouraging and championing women to achieve their ambitions. Using our theatre background, we teach simple straightforward techniques that really work.

[Katherine] We run workshops, or we coach 1:1 either online or face to face. Whether it's in meetings, presentations or challenging conversations, our speciality is helping women gain our 3 Cs: Clarity; Confidence & Courage.

Clarity – Figure out what it is you need to say, how do you articulate the message so that people truly understand you?

Confidence – What gets in the way? What stops you speaking up?

Courage – Learning to be brave in a challenging environment

How has the business evolved since its launch? When was this?

[Katherine] We started creating an online community in the spring of 2021. We work through Instagram, LinkedIn, Eventbrite and, of course, word of mouth. We are currently working with various agencies as well as running our open online workshop – The Women at Work Toolkit.

[Christie] Actually, we've found a lot of our business has come from running free lunchtime masterclasses on themes such as Personal Impact, Influencing Skills and Interview Technique.

Tell us about the working culture at topbird

[Christie] Part of our uniqueness is to create an environment that is positive, supportive and fun. We truly believe this is the best way to stretch yourself and move out of your comfort zone. All the work we do is practical and experiential – it's rooted in our theatre training. Our ambition at the end of every piece of work we do is that people come away with a tangible action plan.

[Katherine] We're both allergic to what we might describe as 'tick box training'. There are huge amounts of books on leadership and effective communication and the theory is fine, but how do you live that? How do you actually take that control when you're in that meeting or that presentation? Or when you sit down to be interviewed by a panel? Answers to those questions through action is what we achieve with our clients.

How are you funded?

[Katherine] We are entirely self funded and always happy to discuss future investment. We would love to support corporate social responsibility programmes, for example.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

[Christie] Like many startups, our biggest challenge is increasing our visibility. Social media has been essential, and connecting to women online and creating a community is an incredibly important part of our business. We've had to teach ourselves how to market topbird on social media, there's been a lot of upskilling on our end!

How does topbird answer an unmet need?

[Katherine] We saw a gap in the market. There are a lot of women who work for SMEs who have no or little career support. We know this is a service we can provide and we know from the feedback that we help produce positive results. If you Google search 'women leadership' you will find lots of theory based academic programmes. We offer a practical approach that ensures women find

their voice whenever they feel under pressure and work their way to the top and thrive when they get there.

[Christie] Empowered women are good for business. It's shown across companies in the US, UK and India that companies with at least one female executive board member tend to make better financial decisions and generally outperform firms with male-only boards. We need to get more women into these positions.

What's in store for the future?

[Katherine] Our ambition is to grow our profile. We're taking time to make considered investments and recently have decided PR is the next move to propel topbird forward. We want to broaden our reach to women in a range of sectors going into 2023, particularly helping women in media and advertising next.

[Christie] At the moment most of our client work is in London and we'd love to expand throughout the UK and further afield. In the immediate future, our next *Women at Work Toolkit* begins on 20th January 2023 – you can find more details on www.topbird.co.uk.

What's one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

[Christie] Consider your partnerships. When deciding who to work with, partner with someone you have a strong relationship with. There are ups and downs in every business journey – as a team you need to be able to recognise each other's strengths and support each other through the challenging moments.

[Katherine] It's easy to revel in the high moments, but working with someone who can motivate you in the tough ones and remind you why you started is key.

And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

[Katherine] Like many startups, we are a moving operation so our days look different at any given time. On a typical day, we're out delivering workshops to

women around London or we're working together from one of our homes.

[Christie] Our planning days are a split between content creation: making film reels and posts for our social platforms and exploring new client leads and scheduling sessions. Our days always start with coffee and often end with us chatting over a glass of wine at the kitchen table – exactly how topbird started.

[Katherine]: Rules we're living by – at topbird each week we like to decide on a 'topbird of the week', which is a woman who has inspired us in the current moment or historically. Recently we've been living by Judy Garland's rule: "Always be a first rate version of yourself, instead of a second rate version of someone else".

Katherine Grice and Christie Jennings are the cofounders of *topbird*.

Article by KATHERINE GRICE & CHRISTIE JENNINGS