
Q&A With Lauren McCallum, Global Managing Director of Mill Film

Lauren McCallum is head of Technicolor's global visual effects studio, Mill Film. In celebration of International Women's Day, she shares her journey to leading one of the largest post-production companies in the world.

Q — Looking back, who or what inspired you growing up, leading to your current role in the industry?

A — I was a precocious, creative little girl who was fortunate to be surrounded by bright, fierce women to look up to. Naturally, as I began my career in the film industry as a runner, I expected to encounter the same. I was stubborn and driven in my conviction to become an artist and work on movies like those that enthralled me as a young woman: *Jaws*, *The Matrix*, and *Lord of the Rings*. Starting from the bottom, I learnt quickly that staying curious and learning quickly would get me far. My keenness and can-do attitude got me noticed and today I'm proud to say that after starting as a runner, I am now running a 300+ person global visual effects studio called Mill Film.

Q — What obstacles did you encounter, and how did that affect you and your choices?

A — I'm not the artist I was once so driven to become. I don't know whether I could ever have reached the heights I dreamt of, because early on I experienced a pretty acute sense of otherness. Fifteen years ago, my experience of VFX was one of a predominantly male world — and I quickly developed a feeling of not only otherness, but only-ness. I distinctly remember waking up early on my days off to watch English football games so that I could bond with my fellow artists. I didn't have a penchant for the sport, but I knew my coworkers did — and it was that feeling of only-ness that drove me to watch, to fight that feeling with the ability to keep up with the conversation. My youthful self had naively thought I could easily follow in the footsteps of those fierce women I grew up with, but I didn't see myself reflected in my peers or the leaders in the organizations I was working at — so my path became increasingly narrow and more difficult to follow.

Q — What made you choose Film Production at this point in your career?

A — When faced with one of the first crossroads in my career path, I chose the challenge of Film Production — where it seemed the ranks swelled with fierce, bright women. In Film Production, I found other "others" — and it was in this environment that I flourished. We may not have liked the same movies or always shared common interests — but we listened to each other more, and we were open to hearing others' points of view. I often wonder about the creative person I might have become had I been able to sit with that acute sense of only-ness long enough to find out — but the decision I made to follow those other "others" made me exactly who I am today.

Q – How are you using your current position to empower women at Mill Film and the industry at large?

A – I now find myself in a leadership role within one of the largest post-production companies in the world, where I have the great privilege and responsibility to drive change from within the industry. I have used this role to foster a culture of diversity and create business objectives that are designed to increase the number of ‘others’ in creative leadership roles. This pledge provides not only Mill Film but our industry peers with visible metrics on how we’re doing as we bring runners, technologists, artists, and supervisors into the conversation, keeping ourselves curious about how to make our own impact within the film industry. Some days we get it right and sometimes we get it wrong — but we always share our learnings with our peers.

Q – What advice do you have for women and others who want to succeed in this — or any — industry?

A – Three of my favorite lessons I’ve learnt as a woman — or as an ‘other’ — in a leadership role in the creative sector, are these:

1. Own your power, and recognize hers. Don’t wait for someone in a position of power to give you an endorsement, and if you recognize another woman waiting for a break or a boost, lift her up too.

At Mill Film, we work to identify future female leaders and provide coaching, presentation skills, mentorship opportunities — even improv training to support them in reaching and exceeding their potential. This is hands-down my favorite thing to do.

2. If you want to change something, become a subject matter expert. Use whatever superpower you have to get there! It could be your kindness, a specific skill, or the willingness to ask what might seem like a silly question. The trick is to challenge yourself to dig-in to the details in order to understand what you’re trying to resolve. The ultimate antidote to mansplaining is subject matter expertise.

We knew we wanted a diverse creative team — but our first big lesson was actually getting to know ourselves. We took a hard look in the mirror, examined our biases, and challenged ourselves to be experts...on ourselves. We dug-in to the literature, took informed bets we could accept — win or lose — educated ourselves as a leadership team — and as of today we operate a team of over 40% female creatives.

3. Think like a BOSS. Every time I sent a submission form to a client or listened to a supervisor critique a piece of work, I would think, why was that decision made? What impact will that have on the business? How much does that cost? At Mill Film, we encourage our teams to stay curious and ask questions — even of the Managing Director of the company. As a manager, having an open door keeps me prepared and ready to push my own limits — and to stay flexible in my management style. In order to lead, I have to stay inclusive — and that requires everyone around me to remain open with their questions and their concerns.

On International Women’s Day and throughout the month of March, there will be many interviews and the spotlight will shine bright on the women in our organizations. McCallum’s hope, and our goal, is to keep that spotlight shining throughout the year, while equally celebrating our allies in this cause. In the meantime, let’s celebrate, validate, and congratulate the women leading diverse creativity in our industry. Happy International Women’s Day!