She has consistently been described as the youngest, first and only in various leadership roles since she was 18. It was this trailblazing spirit, as well as her abiding love for the outdoors, that informed both décor and the conversation on May 22 as Gustavson named Sue Paish, QC, our 2019 Distinguished Entrepreneur of the Year.

She’s currently focused on creating globally competitive Canadian tech companies from her perch in Vancouver, but Paish has had an industry-spanning career studded with impressive titles. The youngest-ever managing partner at Russell & DuMoulin, CEO at Pharmasave, then CEO at LifeLabs Medical Laboratory Services, and now CEO of Canada’s Digital Technology Supercluster, Paish has overseen tremendous growth, expansion and innovation over the course of her career.

As someone who has successfully led a variety of organizations, Paish has unique insight when it comes to transitioning into new leadership roles. “Integrating into and understanding the organization’s heartbeat before talking about the five-year plan is really important,” says Paish, explaining that being a successful leader is about having respect and understanding the people with whom you work. “You can’t change an organization’s direction until you understand the culture, the environment and the people who are actually driving that organization.”

Connecting with and understanding the people she works with has been key to Paish’s success as a leader—whether that means working as a labour relations officer at General Motors at just 18 years old, being the CEO of large-scale organizations or the first employee at Canada’s Digital Technology Supercluster. “If you want to get people to sing a song with you, you have to find out what music they like.”

Paish says it isn’t her role to tell the people she works with how to do their jobs. Rather, it’s her responsibility to help them do their jobs. “You need to tell me what’s going to work for you. Even small things like whether you’re a night person or a morning person, if you’d rather receive a phone call or an e-mail,” she says. Figuring out what works best for people and what they need to succeed in their work is integral to working successfully with others.

Paish’s latest role working as CEO of Canada’s Digital Technology Supercluster has presented her with new and exciting opportunities to support Canadian entrepreneurs and innovators. “This is probably one of the most exciting, scariest, and most important tasks I’ve taken on other than being a mom, and I’ve had some pretty cool jobs in the past,” she says. One of six superclusters in Canada funded by the federal government, this organization focuses on digital technology, bringing together organizations to promote innovation and competition on a global scale.

The supercluster is funding and facilitating a variety of projects, while creating partnerships across organizations, and connecting start-ups and small and medium-sized businesses with post-secondary institutions, multinational corporations and public sector organizations. Paish says this approach differs from traditional methods, where entrepreneurs pitch an idea and get a cheque, but receive very little else in terms of support. “This approach has served us well in some cases, but hasn’t allowed us to grow globally competitive companies,” she says. The supercluster aims to do this by bringing together organizations to solve problems collaboratively.

Their first cohort of projects was announced in March 2019. “Here’s the kind of thing we’re doing,” says Paish. “There’s a small company that’s developed a software that matches your genetic profile to the most commonly prescribed medications so that you can get the right drug at the right time. We’re putting this company around the table with other players so that we can run this software, scale it across Canada and around the world.”

This, along with six other projects, are in the first phase of their launch. Thirteen more projects are currently under review, with even more expected by the end of the year. “We have amazing digital expertise in British Columbia. Why not take that expertise and put it into this supercluster?”

Lessons in leading from DEYA 2019 honouree Sue Paish by Jensen Kirby