Chatting with Keira Torkko, BCom ’97, you can’t help but feel inspired—empowered, even. Her unique approach to business could be likened to finally taking a camera lens cap off and letting the light stream in.

It’s an approach she has honed as a result of an unorthodox 26-year career journey and the experience she has gained working in a number of different roles during that time in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors.

“My job, as I see it, is to solve business puzzles through the lens of people,” explains Torkko, chief people officer at supply chain sustainability management company Assent, where she leads the development of its team.

“If we’re not thinking about people first and their contributions to the business, we’re not thinking about our business in the right way.”

Since Torkko joined four years ago, Assent has grown from 300 team members to more than 900 and recently raised $360 million (USD) in venture funding. Torkko credits the company’s great people strategy for this exponential growth.

Business Class caught up with Torkko to discuss how she broke the traditional career journey mould, how understanding the importance of personal branding yielded results for her and what it means to tackle business puzzles through the lens of people.
it was time to diversify my work portfolio, and I joined the National Research Council of Canada in its new company creation and tech transfer commercialization group. I was there for 12 years and had eight different jobs, continually increasing the size of my team and leadership responsibility across a wide range of technologies. I reached a point where I felt I had reached a ceiling and was given the opportunity to join the Coaching Association of Canada as COO. I was part of the leadership team responsible for raising the stature and influence of Canadian coaches, from youth sport to high performance across 67 national sports. I loved it there—it took me off journey and off path, and was exactly what I needed at the time. We drove high performance in sport through great leadership.

For my next opportunity, I wanted to experience a different kind of personal growth and continue to have an impact. Through time spent in a previous board role, I met a colleague who put me in touch with the CEO at Assent. We hit it off right away. We spoke about the role of VP of HR. I had never done that role! But I had hired, led and managed hundreds of people over my career and it seemed like a natural transition.

BC: Your own career path has been somewhat unconventional and breaks many stereotypical ideas. Can you tell us how you got to where you are today?

KT: After my BCom degree at UVic in 1996, I worked in a few small companies and then entered into the financial sector with TD Bank, where I worked in both personal and commercial banking. I realized finance wasn’t my passion, but I loved working with my customers. My husband (also a UVic grad) and I moved to Ottawa and I took a job at the Ottawa Centre for Regional Innovation (OCRI) where I was able to take my business banking experience and help people start small businesses. After the tech downturn, called Mick Collins who told me the difference he saw in me from my first co-op work term to the end of my last co-op was immense. I was shy and pushed myself to develop my confidence and leadership through the program.

One of the best things I ever did during my degree was take an elective course called Acting for non-theatre students. One of my first assignments had I stand up in front of a class of students I didn’t know and play the fool. I would vomit in the bathroom before that class! But that really pushed me out of my comfort zone. It showed me how important it is to do things you don’t think you’re capable of. That happened throughout my career. One time I was asked to take on a large team of 300 in a domain I wasn’t that familiar with. I said no to the job three times. Finally the leader said, “You’re doing this.” They knew I was capable, even if I didn’t. It made me realize that you don’t need to be an expert in the specific technology, for example, since the team has that expertise. They needed someone who could provide them with direction, motivation and who understood the business and systems to help them to be successful. I was fortunate that the person wouldn’t take no for an answer! That was powerful.

BC: How important were mentors to your career journey?

KT: For many of my roles I was fortunate to have leaders who pushed me. They saw things when I didn’t. I would never have applied for many of the roles, as I didn’t think I had the skills, but I had great champions and cheerleaders to help me get those opportunities.

If I hadn’t been given that opportunity to lead large teams outside of my comfort zone early on in my career, I wouldn’t be where I am today. My portfolio at Assent has grown off a predetermined path is rewarding. I believe we should always be reaching higher and that lifelong learning is important. While I was at OCRI, I became a Certified General Accountant (CGA—now CPA). I never wanted to practice directly as an accountant, but I wanted to have that financial knowledge. Even now, in HR, my accounting designation still provides extraordinary value. I ask questions people never expect of me and I get asked to the table to support all aspects of the business. Coaching and mentoring others is also important to me—recognizing the potential in others and how that drives performance. I actually currently hired my first UVic business grad, Somto Odili (MGB ’21), and she is fantastic. She likely teaches me more than I teach her.

Ultimately, I want to be a great role model for my teenage boys. I want to show them that career/value/values can live in harmony and that I am supportive and supported. That, and that taking risks which may take you off a predetermined path is rewarding. Be open to the possibilities.