



EPISODE 59 Want to test drive your career idea?

With guest Dr. Sue MacLellan-Tobert

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ST: “Find that way to positively give yourself feedback and a little tagline that's going to lift you up, not break you down, get you out of the rut and keep you moving forward. Because it's really about moving forward, isn't it?”

HF: Welcome to The Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. If you're questioning your career in medicine, you've come to the right place. I'm Heather Fork, a former dermatologist and founder of The Doctor's Crossing. As a master certified coach, I've helped hundreds of physicians find greater happiness in their career, whether in medicine, a nonclinical job, or something else. I started this podcast to help you discover the career path that's best for you and give you some resources and encouragement to make it happen. You don't need to get stuck at the white coat crossroads. So, pull up a chair, my friend, and let's carpe that diem.

Hello, hello and welcome back to the Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. You are listening to episode number 59. Just a few announcements before we dive in. This episode is coming out right before Christmas. So, I want to wish you and your loved ones a wonderful holiday and New Year's. We'll be resuming the podcast on January 12th. So please feel free to catch up on any back episodes and know that we'll resume the second week of January.

Also, I want to let you know that the 20% discount on my new LinkedIn course for positions will expire at midnight on December 31st. Before you toast that champagne, if

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this is something that you'd like, please make sure to check it out. This course will be great to have if you're wanting to make some career changes in 2022 and would love to have an easy-to-follow step by step approach for using LinkedIn.

A lot of my clients have made incredible connections with perfect strangers on LinkedIn that have led to great jobs and opportunities. To learn more about this online course, you can go to doctorscrossing.com/linkedincourse or simply visit the Doctor's Crossing website and hit the products top. The discount coupon code is 2021, and I will put that in the show notes.

Now onto our episode. Today, we're talking about how to do a test drive of a possible career direction while you're still working in your current job. Since as physicians, we've climbed mountains to get to where we are and are often rather risk averse, we're not likely to take a big leap and just try something out without doing a bit of due diligence. But when you're working hard and hardly have time to exercise, how do you try something out and test the water so to speak?

For a number of non-clinical jobs, you can do a bit of a test drive and try out the work you might be doing before leaping. You might call it a scratch and sniff test too. When you get closer to experiencing a potential career area, does it appeal to you or not? We'll be talking about some test drives you can do as well as how to prioritize the time to make this happen and a session learning from the experience.

To explore this topic today, my delightful guest is Dr. Sue MacLellan-Tobert, a board-certified pediatric cardiologist whose test drive and coaching created some exciting opportunities for her that you'll be hearing about. She'll be sharing how she was able to do her test drive as well as offering an approach to planning and executing your own test drive. I'm very honored and excited to welcome Dr. Sue MacLellan-Tobert to the podcast. Hey Sue. Welcome. How are you?



ST: I'm great, Heather. Thanks for having me here today. I'm excited to see you and connect with your audience.

HF: Yes, I'm thrilled. And it's interesting because we're going to be talking about these test drives, but then later I want to have you back on the podcast because what you're doing in the world of coaching for physicians in your academic institution, it's fascinating. We're going to hold off on diving too much into that, but we'll be able to explore that in a future episode.

ST: Is it fair to say it's like you've taken me for a test drive today and then you'll have me back later?

HF: Yes, yes. But we're going to launch this for sure. This one's going off the parking lot.

ST: Awesome. Awesome.

HF: Yes, yes. I'd love it if you could tell the listeners a bit about yourself and prepare the platform for sharing about your test drive.

ST: Sure. Yeah. I'm happy to do that. As you mentioned, I'm a pediatric cardiologist and I've been in practice in the Midwest for about 24 years. I would say that it's really been in the last few years that I have been just a little bit more tired, maybe a bit burned out with the work that I'm doing. Certainly, lots of calls. I could push that aside at a moment's notice. What's a bit more that we can do for clinician wellness at our institution? And it was about three years ago that I stumbled across coaching and actually took a course as a test drive. We tried it out, learned a lot about coaching and were able to come back and share it with our administration. And then I just moved on with wanting to get more coaching experience, myself, more training. And so, here I am three years later as an associate certified coach. I'm loving it. And it's added a whole new dimension to my life. Yeah. So that's me in a nutshell.



HF: Do you want to tell us just a little bit about these three different things that you are actually doing right now with being in practice coaching in your institution and then coaching private clients just briefly?

ST: I work as a general pediatric cardiologist. I love echocardiography. That's kind of an area that I've focused on and that takes up four days a week. And then as part of my work at my institution, I also have four to six hours a week dedicated to coaching my colleagues. And there's a group of five of us coaches that are all with medical backgrounds, medical providers that have gone on to get training. So that's our little internal group that serves our colleagues.

And then just recently I have branched out to start my own private coaching practice, as I transition in the next few years toward retirement. I think that coaching is a fabulous way to just kind of continue on serving my colleagues because I think physicians are amazing. They're fabulous. They're such creative well-rounded individuals and yet we're all in the midst of suffering I think with what's going on, and how to practice medicine nowadays with the pandemic. So, I think that's really my mantra, Heather, is that I'm just dedicated to my colleagues. I like to tell people that I've moved from taking care of kid's hearts to helping to take care of the hearts of my colleagues.

HF: Yeah. That's a beautiful imagery and I totally feel that heart for serving physicians. It's what gets me up every day and gives me so much satisfaction in what I do. I just wanted to clarify here, because I think a really interesting point is that part of your salary is actually going towards you getting to do this coaching of your colleagues in your institution, is that correct?

ST: Correct. Our administration brought together a group of us about four years ago to say, "How can we pour into the wellbeing of our providers?" The burnout data is out, et cetera. This was all pre pandemic. It was just totally the best timing every time I think about it because we were preparing and now, we are really prepared to serve our



colleagues as they are even more challenged with what's going on in practice. And so, yes, they said we're going to dedicate these funds, initially it was three of us trained and offered us support in IT to launch our own internal webpage. We have a scheduler secretary who helps us. All these pieces came together. We felt like we won a lottery. Who knew that our administration would be with that on board?

HF: It's stunning. And that's definitely why I want to devote an episode to diving into this further because I know there are physicians out there who will want to be doing this in their institution and also seeing if they could have that as a resource. This is super exciting, and your test drive led to it.

ST: Yes, yes, exactly. It was unexpected.

HF: Before we launch into the nuts and bolt of how to do a test drive, I wanted to just mention some different things that you could do for a test drive to try out some of these nonclinical directions. Some of the things that come to mind are topics we've already had on the podcast, such as medical writing. You could just do some writing on your own and see how that goes. You can do chart review and that can help you decide if you want to be doing utilization management and a number of areas such as health insurance companies, benefit management companies, be a physician advisor, working disability, life insurance. Many, many areas.

You could also do some things with the EMR like we had the episode with Dr. Laura Marusinec. Get involved in informatics in your institution. Teaching, that was a recent podcast with Liz McMurtry. You could also be a sub-investigator if you're interested in arm or get involved in a local clinical trial. Coaching is something we've already mentioned. You could have a niche practice while you're still in your current practice. Maybe you want to focus on weight loss, lifestyle medicine, aesthetics, sports medicine, integrated medicine. These are just some things to get your brain percolating of what's

possible for a test drive. Now, Sue, would you like to start with the first step, which is thinking about how to plan your test drive?

ST: Sure, sure. Can I add one other thing in? I'm just thinking about medicine so often we park our creative side. As I'm listening to you read all these things you could potentially get involved in. Like for instance, medical writing. One of the things that just jumped out at me is what did you park from your younger years that you aren't using as a skill right now and what could you bring back forward? It's actually not that hard to get a blog posted on Kevin MD. If you have a great idea, share it. I'm thinking of other little side businesses, creative things, taking your craftiness and going to a craft show. There are so many different ways that we can reactivate our previous strengths that we put on hold, bring them forward again. So, I would offer encouragement along those lines too.

HF: Yes, I absolutely agree. Sometimes we get in this space where we tell ourselves we're not creative, but every human being is creative and we're always creative as children. We don't even have to think of things that are in traditional healthcare or medicine. It might be that you want to bake things and sell them. I had a client who started a dessert franchise and that's been very successful. Others have done things in music or art and they're fiction writers too. So, it's really anything at all. And I think that you have a few examples too Sue.

ST: Yeah. I'm thinking of one of our practicing clinicians right now who is also an independent musician and he plays evenings around town, which is awesome. Yeah. He's written a book too, so you're right. Lots of writers out there. A different way to document instead of the EMR. Get creative.

HF: Right. Definitely. As we're talking about these test drives, open up the world to yourself. And the most important thing is, is it something that energizes you? Don't get stuck on it has to be successful. It has to make money. It has to replace your current job or income

or anything like that. I just want to give you that framework for thinking outside the box. Step number one. How do they start planning their test drive?

ST: All right. You're in this place where you feel like, "Okay, something needs to change or I need to explore something." Like we talked about, those creative juices are flowing. What's next? Really number one is about developing and testing your plan. What's your idea? Where do you want to go from there? And it doesn't have to be that you arrive at the whole final finished product immediately. We need to be satisfied with taking little tiny steps, which might be some networking, some researching topics that interest us. Connecting maybe with others who've done something similar. Just be willing to try it out, but hold it lightly because it's not always necessarily going to turn into a successful test drive. You test drive cars, but you don't always buy the first one.

HF: Right. Exactly. And you know as soon as you're in the car and driving around, even for a few minutes, you often have a sense of whether you want that car or not.

ST: Yeah. I think we kind of get caught up in our own performance. Okay, we have to do this well and it has to be perfect, but test driving a car that you're going to buy is not about that. It's about how well the car does, not how we are driving it.

HF: And you have experience. Really focusing on what the experience is like for you and where your energy is flowing.

ST: Yeah. The journey. The journey, not the end game and product.

HF: One thing I like that you brought out is tiny stuff. This doesn't have to be a big thing because I think it's easy to get caught up in "Oh, I'm interested in coaching. I better go pay \$10,000 to get certified."



ST: Yeah. That's interesting because when I was thinking about this coaching idea, I thought, "Well, wow, that would be great to have a coaching program for physicians." I didn't even know programs like this existed and thank goodness for Google because there I discovered there's this whole world of physician coaching.

But I really presented it to our administration sort of as an act of good faith. I'm going to take some of my CME money and I'm going to go to a three-day coaching retreat and just explore it. And that was the first little step I took. Little did I know that my switch would really get flipped on and I'd get so jazzed up about, "Wow, this is awesome." And I came away feeling great. So, I got something out of it myself too.

HF: I think maybe being a frugal test driver is a good way to think about this. For example, to even test the waters for writing, you don't have to even take a writing course. Even see if you're willing to write a couple pieces on your own. And these could even be put on your LinkedIn profile. You can post your own articles because I've seen it happen where people will pay thousands of dollars for a course and then realize "I really don't like to write that much."

ST: That's a great point. Yeah.

HF: Try to do the minimum output of money that you can do to get some answers. All right. Are there other things they should think about? Some physicians might wonder "Well, okay, I have an idea, but I'm still kind of stuck on what to really do next."

ST: I think it's interesting when we're thinking about branching out, but we're in this comfortable place right now and we don't really know what the next step is. There's kind of this tension created like how far out do I step out of my comfort zone to try something new? And a lot of it comes down to, as you mentioned, the financial part of it.

And I've really noticed that when this tension happens, that's often the time that there's this most creativity. Exploring in researching. We're good at researching as scientists. I come back to explore and research and learn and very likely something will catch your attention that you're going to be able to dive into a little further.

HF: I think you're right in that. We can often get stuck in the thinking phase and find reasons to talk ourselves out of why not us. "Oh, there are already all these coaches. I'm really not that great of a writer or how would this even work?" That's what I see happening so often is that we don't usually go to, "What are the possibilities? What could this do for me?" We go to "Why is it not going to work?"

ST: That's a great point. I think what I discovered as I was kind of morphing into this coaching exploration is I developed this crazy little tagline for myself that I'm working the plan. I didn't even know what the plan was or what the end game was going to be, but I would remind myself, kind of that positive reinforcement, there's an opportunity to connect with someone who has some coaching background. I tell myself, let's work the plan.

And so, find that way to positively give yourself feedback, a little tagline that's going to lift you up, not break you down, get you out of the rut and keep you moving forward. Because it's really about moving forward, isn't it?

HF: It is. Maybe say, "Okay, what action step am I going to take this week on my plan?" I have to have some degree of action, whether it's even just sending an email to somebody.

ST: That's true. And that gets to some self-motivation too, Heather. We got to keep ourselves motivated. If we're exploring something new, there may not be somebody else there to push us along.



HF: Right. Exactly. And we're good at that. We wouldn't have gotten where we are today if we didn't have self-motivation.

ST: True. True.

HF: All right. Now, step number two is to figure out how to fit in this test drive. How did you do it? We are very busy. You didn't just stop practicing and say, "Okay, I'm going on a sabbatical to do my test drive."

ST: Right. What I would say to that is that it's really kind of finding a balance of your time and your energy. Have I ever been guilty of being over committed and doing too much? I mean, yes, totally. That's kind of sometimes what practicing medicine is like. But I felt like I was at a point in life where I could get a better understanding of "Can I actually make this effort, even this next little step? What would it look like?" And then I honestly had to hold it lightly that if I didn't accomplish something some week, because I had a busy call night and was tired that day, I was going to take my next little step, I just had to hold it lightly, not berate myself. Just know that it was eventually going to evolve. And lo and behold here, here I am three years later, a lot has happened. But if I think back, it was a lot of little steps and just working that plan, working that plan and moving forward as it organically unfolded, if that makes sense.

HF: Did you ask to go down in time at all to be able to have some more space?

ST: Sometimes when we take more work on there's this frenzy pace for a while, it gets a little chaotic before we get to kind of the end point. And I do recall sometimes we felt that. Incredibly enough, our administration then came to the three coaches that did the training and they offered to give us 0.1 FTE four hours a week to coach internally, which was again like a gift. And so, we had felt this tension again, and then guess what? The next step opened up into this beautiful meadow of "Yep, you have time to do this now."

I think sometimes when we least expect it, some pretty cool things can happen and just being open to that. And I think one of the other philosophies I have in life is to always try to choose the simpler approach. It doesn't have to be really complicated. You come to this fork in the road. Do I cut back and lose salary and try and fit in a whole bunch of internal clients, et cetera, et cetera, or do I just wait a little bit and kind of work the plan and see what administration says??

Well, the least effort there is just to toss it out to administration and see. They came back and they gave us that space. It doesn't always work perfectly, but I'm just saying the simpler, the better. Don't get caught up in too much of the logistics of trying to over plan.

HF: Yeah. And just some practical things that physicians can do. I do believe in asking to go down in time, if that's something you want to do. Just for any reason, any reason at all. The worst they can do is say no. And they might say not now, but I've seen it happen later. And then look at all of your obligations. It might be good to write down all the things that you've committed to because often if you're a doer and a giver, you might have filled your plate up with things that you don't really want. Like maybe some extra peas.

ST: Absolutely.

HF: It's kind of like starting to look at your priorities and seeing what's a "heck yes" and what's a "heck no" because that can be adjusted in your work world. It could also be in your home life.

ST: Right. I had this visual of me scraping peas off my plate to make room for the really juicy piece of roast beef. That's kind of what it's like. Absolutely.

HF: Did you do anything different in your home life to create some extra time and space?

ST: Yeah, I guess what I would say is I want to add one other thing. I'm a huge believer in being a four day or less per week physician.

HF: Me too. Oh, my God's, that's full time. That's way full time.

ST: It is full time. Yes.

HF: It's over full time.

ST: In my home life, I met with my family. I have three older daughters, at that time, a couple of them were still at home and I said "Can I make this commitment to studying and to doing these courses and classes and training and how would it look?" And one of my daughters pointed out, well, they sit around the table doing homework at night. It would be kind of actually fun if mom did that too.

HF: That's so sweet. I love that you sat down and talked to them and involved them.

ST: Yeah. It was great. I never would've thought about it from that angle and they're like, "Oh yeah, totally mom, come on." And so, at this point, they've even read some of my coaching manuals and books that I like. It's been a good family learning experience.

HF: I love how you integrated it into your home life and it didn't just sort of keep it like this thing I have to do when the kids are asleep or wake up extra early. No one knows I'm taking time for this. It doesn't have to be a dark closet experience.

That was like figuring out how to fit this in so you can have some time and we don't want you to burn yourself out. The third step is to evaluate your learning. How do they do this?

ST: Again, it comes back to being willing to be the observer of what's going on in the moment and this is the scientist part of it. What are you observing in this experiment? It's not about being critical that, "Oh, I didn't make that connection" or "I didn't get anything out of that experience as I'm trying to move forward in whatever new career aspect you're exploring."

We have to stay objective. And again, it's really about managing our expectations. Things may or may not work out in life. We have to hold some of it lightly. And in the meantime, we might learn a ton during the journey that might even redirect us in a different direction.

HF: Yeah. It's not like if it doesn't turn out to be something you really want to do that it's a failure by any means or wasted time is what I hear you saying.

ST: There's always learning, even when we don't do our homework. Well, what did we learn about that?

HF: Yeah. And sometimes because we're often in "go-go" mode, we're not necessarily sure how to even dive into our experience, and get what we need out of it. And so, just a couple things I offer my clients is when you're trying something out, quantify it, give it a number. Like on 0 to 10. How am I enjoying this? Because we can always come up with a number and it's really simple. I always say, if it's below a 7, don't bother with it. We like an 8, 9 or a 10, but we can hang with 7. That simplifies all the details when we get in our head.

Another thing you can do is ask a question, like, "Why does this interest me?" Or "Why was this a bust?" And write that down, but then ask, "Well, why is that?" And then ask "Why?" again. Be like a four-year-old. Bug yourself with the "why's" because we go deeper into these layers, we start to see themes. And then we start to really connect with our values, what's important to us. What are these themes that we can look for in maybe different aspects of work or even different opportunities? Because it may not be

the thing we tried, but we learned something about ourselves. We learned we love problem solving, but whatever we were doing in it, wasn't the right thing. So, we look and look for something else, because we have a theme now.

ST: I think that's a great point. I love your little scale of attaching a number to it. I'm going to take that with me and try it. We ask patients all the time about their pain scale. This is like a little joy meter instead. How much joy are you getting out of this experience?

HF: Yes. Yes.

ST: I love it. I love it.

HF: If I can riff off Marie Kondo and say, "Does this spark joy?" I love that you brought in, this is our joy meter. Excellent, Sue.

ST: That's right, exactly. The other thing I think of is medical training really gets us into this performance driven success driven habit. And so, we always are trying to move toward this end goal. And we might even miss all this beautiful stuff that's happening to us in the journey because we have the final goal in mind. Yet what you and I are talking about today, Heather, is different than that.

We're saying, enjoy the journey, hold it lightly. Make sure you have enough time and energy to do it. Even if you don't succeed, what is the learning there? This is the adult learning process. It's not the medical student learning process anymore. And in the end, you're going to have success, no matter what. It may not look like what you set out to do, but you're still going to come away with some really valuable learning nuggets.

HF: Yes. And it could save you so much time. As you're talking it just reminds me of when I was a kid because I loved animals. I had decided I was going to be a veterinarian at a super young age. Even in high school I was taking Latin and I was doing these things I

thought would be good for going to vet school. Then I got this opportunity to work in his vet clinic when I was a sophomore in high school, just cleaning the packs and sterilizing everything. Back then they sterilized the gloves! We reused gloves and syringes and everything.

And just from that little test drive, I figured out that I don't want to be a vet. I wasn't even in the exam room with him except a few times and I was like "I don't really like to do things to people's animals". I just rather play with them. If I hadn't done that test drive, I could have been already in vet school before I realized that this was not a good fit.

ST: You are also in telling that story, thank you for sharing it, bringing up another point. What are we doing now in life that is like a test drive, but we haven't even named it that yet? That we could date...

HF: Like dating somebody.

ST: Yeah. We don't always call all our experiences test drives, but wow, they might lead us down a path where we're onto something new.

HF: And you bring up another point too, is that there are likely a number of you out there listening who are actually doing test drives, but you're not calling it that. It's often when you're doing something late at night, like researching something, keeping files and folders on a topic or reaching out to other people. And so, take a look at yourself and see if that's happening to you because it could very well be a big clue to a direction for you.

ST: That's wonderful. And then you can point your joy meter in that direction, press the gas pedal and you're off.



HF: Right, exactly. It might be like digging off of the Richter scale. Yeah, because if you're already doing it and not even fully, it's just a part of you, your energy is already flowing there. You're not even having to generate it really. That's a huge sign that's connected to your spirit in some way, which is part of you.

ST: That's beautiful. Beautiful.

HF: This has been a really fun conversation, Sue. Do you have any last thoughts you'd like to share?

ST: Yeah, I would just say that transitions are hard. Anytime we come up against them, it's an opportunity to get creative, think outside the box. Self-care is important during these times of transition. Managing your time, your energy, taking care of yourself in all of this is I think vital. And as you mentioned earlier, we're already great at being motivated. Find that tagline that's going to help drive you forward and stay motivated as you work the plan. Just moving forward is the big piece.

HF: Plan your work, work your plan. I love it. Now you do some coaching for physicians outside of your institution. For physicians who might be interested in working with you, how can they get in touch and is there a certain type of client that you work with?

ST: Sure. Yes, I do. I have started my own private practice for coaching and I do individual coaching. And interestingly, internally we've branched into some group coaching and I have a little program that I'm launching too. If you have a group of individuals who are interested in exploring resiliency, that's kind of one of my areas of focus is how do we stay resilient? We're already all resilient. It's no denying that, but how do we stay resilient, how do we buffer against burnout? Kind of in the midst of all this chaos.

And so, if that's something you're interested in exploring more, definitely, I have my own webpage. It is www.healingedgecoaching.com and I'd be happy to connect with you.



HF: Wonderful. Well, I will put links to your website as well as your LinkedIn profile in the show notes. Also link to episodes that could be potential test drives for you, a topic we've already discussed. And I just wanted to say again, I wish you all the best for the holidays. I'm very excited for the new year. I love Christmas lights. It's one of my favorite things. They just make me happy. And if you have some Christmas lights you want to share a photo with me, feel free to send that to team@doctorscrossing.com. I'd love to see your lights.

All right, well happy, happy holidays. I'll see you in the new year and don't forget to carpe that diem. Bye for now.

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Podcast details

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