

Breaking into Cybersecurity Leadership - Malia Mason

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[00:00:23] **Chris:** Welcome to another episode of Breaking Into Cybersecurity, where today we're interviewing another cybersecurity leader that's looking to share their tips, tricks, and advice on you becoming a future cybersecurity leader. Would you be able to tell us a little bit about yourself and what got you into cybersecurity

[00:00:45] **Malia Mason:** to begin?

[00:00:46] **Malia Mason:** Thanks for having me. My name is Malia Mason and I am head of security engineering and operations at a little startup called Corvus Insurance. I've been here since May of last year and it's been fun. I get to
[00:01:00] build everything from the ground up here for our security programs, and I've been doing cybersecurity for, we'll call it over 10 years.

[00:01:09] **Malia Mason:** I try not to age myself too much there. And really my cybersecurity. Background started in the military. So I served in the Navy from 2011 to 2015, and that was my first kind of foray into cybersecurity and the concept of protecting our nation's secrets. I thought this was a really cool job.

[00:01:26] **Malia Mason:** It coincided well with my growing up tearing apart electronics with my dad. He was an electrician and, growing up with the MS. DOS computers. Having to do command prompt my way into things. Again, dating myself, . But it was really fun. I feel like when I did that job in the military and I had to lead a team too, when I was in the military, I really felt like I found my fit and.

[00:01:51] **Malia Mason:** I hadn't really heard of that concept of this whole kind of cybersecurity thing. I think it was still new and it was still like mostly like governmental government based or [00:02:00] maybe in the financial sector. But I really wanted to continue that and especially on what we consider Blue team, so the defense of side of cybersecurity.

[00:02:08] **Malia Mason:** And I've been leading people since. I'd say at least 15, 20 years now. And. I really enjoy mentoring folks. I really enjoy the teaching aspect of of our jobs. I really believe in cybersecurity. We don't do a

good enough job of pulling ourselves out of the shadows and really talking through these concepts with our users and really talking through the why of what, of why we're doing this.

[00:02:33] **Malia Mason:** And so I really enjoy. That aspect of leadership is sharing that knowledge and, teaching the next generation and getting them excited about cybersecurity and hopefully as passionate as I am in cybersecurity. .

[00:02:45] **Malia Mason:** So you jumped

[00:02:46] **Chris:** on that and , it brought up the question of why did you want to move forward from a, an individual contributor to becoming a leader, and did you have any struggles along the way?

[00:02:59] **Malia Mason:** The tech industry [00:03:00] is still very much male dominated , it's, I think, The last numbers that we got for women in cybersecurity is we might represent 15% of the industry. And, I recognize that as much as I was trying to get more diverse individuals, hired or trying to pull them into the industry I recognize.

[00:03:20] **Malia Mason:** The best way to affect change is if you're at the top and cuz the top, the leadership drives d e i or leadership drives the tone and the culture of an organization. And I've had some toxic leaders in the past and, I really wanted to. To get to the point where I could be in those closed door meetings, in those leadership meetings, I could have the ear of the executive leadership and eventually be an executive leader myself, and be able to affect change and be able to make positive changes as it relates to, the culture and the direction and the hiring practices of an organization.

[00:03:56] **Malia Mason:** And I've absolutely found that since I've gotten to a [00:04:00] manager role. Yes, many doors have opened up for me and then that means that I can open up doors for others. And I've been able to help a lot more people. And I've been able to affect way more change having that magical, manager at above title versus.

[00:04:14] **Malia Mason:** Just being an individual contributor. So that's one thing I really love. I got a taste of being a CISO for a little bit. I loved it. That's, there's a lot more world of opportunities that open up when you have that magical C-Suite title. Versus if you're just.

[00:04:29] **Malia Mason:** Platform engineer or if you are a principal engineer which is not to say that's well and fine people who wanna do platform or not platform. If you wanna do principal engineering and you just wanna focus on, on, really digging deep into the tech. Fantastic. don't think everybody should be managers, but I really do love working with people leading people and.

[00:04:48] **Malia Mason:** Like I said, mentoring is huge for me and I love being able to affect change and that's actually what I look for whenever I'm looking at jobs, is what's my ability to affect change. [00:05:00] And if I can't make positive changes at a company, I gotta go, they're not gonna work with me. And, wanna be able to be a driving force for good at a company and I want them to be able to support me.

[00:05:11] **Malia Mason:** As

[00:05:11] **Chris:** you grow and take on those more senior titles, you end up with a lot more responsibilities. , talk to me about delegation and how you're able to do that to develop the next generation of leaders.

[00:05:25] **Malia Mason:** it's critical. Like even at. I'm at our startup now and, I joke, I'm a one woman show and it's I'm really, six cybersecurity leaders in one.

[00:05:35] **Malia Mason:** And I really do have to trust the other teams and I have to trust other people. And I have to be humble and reach out for help when I need it. I can't be the subject matter expert on everything. I have to do my best with my information, but I have. Be able to know where are my limits and when do I ask other people, and when do I rely on them for help?

[00:05:56] **Malia Mason:** And that's something that, know, I think is really important as a leader [00:06:00] is, know your own limits, know when you should be humble. Know when you should reach for help. And don't get your ego in the. No, I don't think there's any room for egos in cybersecurity. It's a, it's definitely a team sport, and the game literally changes as we're playing it.

[00:06:16] **Malia Mason:** So one person's gonna know more about one thing than another, and knowing when to. Reach beyond and knowing when to acknowledge you don't know everything. I think that's huge. And being able to build the next level of folks. It's something that I work with at my current company is a lot of our engineers have expressed interest in cybersecurity.

[00:06:36] **Malia Mason:** So I take the time to talk to them about these concepts and share articles with them and share platforms. Like Try hack me

and, hey, let's talk through this and. , let's develop your interest. That's awesome. Help me out. And I've seen the results where they're reporting to me security vulnerabilities and they're like, Hey, did you see this in the news?

[00:06:55] **Malia Mason:** This might be concerning. You should shake, take a look at that. And I praise them for it. And I say, yes. [00:07:00] Thank you so much. This is great. You're helping to defend the castle like you're helping me out. Thank you so much. Great job. , absolutely. Like relying on your teams and delegating out.

[00:07:10] **Malia Mason:** Cuz I have, I'm in a lot of meetings all day, every day. Talking with a lot of different teams across all different departments and I can't do it all. And being able to let that go I think is really important. And being able to acknowledge when you can't do something, when you need help. Cause it's real easy to just, say, oh, I'm a Wonder woman.

[00:07:29] **Malia Mason:** I could do it all. That's something I've learned. You can't , there's literally not enough time in the day for cybersecurity, at least for one person.

[00:07:36] **Chris:** It sounds like you also are really strong in the skill of collaboration as well. , tell us more a little bit about how that plays into your leadership.

[00:07:47] **Malia Mason:** Absolutely, cybersecurity definitely doesn't exist in a vacuum. We, you, when you have DevOps and you have data science and you have developers and you have product managers and you've people, all these different stakeholders [00:08:00] and security really needs to be the glue that pulls everybody together as we're building in processes, Go to them and be a part of their process, as they're building out their next program or their roadmap and say, oh, let me, can I know your roadmap?

[00:08:17] **Malia Mason:** Hey, I see some areas in which we can build in security into your roadmap. Let's talk about it. Let's work together. Let's work with the business rather than just getting steamrolled by the business because we know the business is gonna go forward with certain things. So it's really important to meet the business.

[00:08:33] **Malia Mason:** Where they're at. And we can advise, we can say, oh, you probably shouldn't do that. Please don't collect all this data. The data's very valuable. We're gonna collect it anyway. Okay. How do we make sure that we're

properly securing and maintaining that data? So I think that's really critical, is not to be the no fund police, which we can very easily.

[00:08:51] **Malia Mason:** Delve into that realm, but be the collaborator, be the person that the developers and the engineers want to talk to. Not the groan of oh, I have to go [00:09:00] talk through security. She's gonna yell at me. No, I want them to be, excited to talk to me, or at least want to talk to me and not hide things from me.

[00:09:09] **Malia Mason:** That's way better. So building that good relationship with the other teams, I think is absolutely critical.

[00:09:16] **Chris:** As you think about communication, how does communication tie into being a strong leader?

[00:09:23] **Malia Mason:** Very important. We can be, again, it's like the no fun police. We can be the doom and gloom and naysayers and oh, it's terrible and all this stuff happens. So I think it's really important the tone that we take with in expressing our security concerns and, not.

[00:09:41] **Malia Mason:** coming down on people like, you're the disappointed parent. I can't believe you did this. Talking with them like, oh, this is a learning opportunity, and having that. Going into that teacher mode. I really admire the patience that teachers have working with our children.

[00:09:54] **Malia Mason:** And I lean on that a little bit. It's okay let's talk about things like, let's talk about what happened here. Let's [00:10:00] talk about how do we improve things going forward. And making sure you have that friendly and approachable tone again, that really helps cuz then again, you don't necessarily wanna shame the person.

[00:10:10] **Malia Mason:** Like how could you click on that? You idiot. You knew that was a Phish email. What the heck? No say, oh I, you clicked on that. You clicked on that Phish email. In the future, here are ways that you can look at this and, sorry you clicked on it this time. Oh, it happens to all of us.

[00:10:24] **Malia Mason:** But here are ways that you can avoid that in the future, cuz you wanna build that trust, you want the users to talk to you. You don't want them to like shy away from you. So it's really important in how we communicate these things. I think in the industry, we're not doing a good enough job of, again, like I said before, coming outta the shadows and really talking through the issues and security and like, why do we do these things?

[00:10:46] **Malia Mason:** Why do we mandate, rotating your passwords, or why do we mandate some of these rules that people may not understand? So taking the time that extra 30 seconds or extra minute or two to talk to users as to why we're doing [00:11:00] these things can really help. Cuz then you see the aha moment, they're like, oh , that matches what I saw on the news.

[00:11:06] **Malia Mason:** Now you see why we're thinking this way. And I've seen that work really well where teams actually predict. Now when they're talking to me, they were like, Hey, you probably have questions about this, and this, cuz you've brought it up before. We wanted to talk to you about this. And now I was like, ah, cool.

[00:11:22] **Malia Mason:** We're thinking on the same level. And now they're predicting what I'm gonna have issues with when they're building their products. So I think what's really important is take that extra time to talk through the why's and not just issue oh, you can't do that because I said so don't be that.

[00:11:39] **Malia Mason:** And a, as you communicate with them and build that relationship with them, how does influence come into play and how is it slightly different than just communicating?

[00:11:51] **Malia Mason:** It's so interesting. Our industry is so weird cuz we have these cybersecurity, quote unquote influencers. [00:12:00] And. Being able to, having the clout right is I get a certain amount of clout because when people here I worked at I was one of the leaders in cybersecurity for Hulu and Disney.

[00:12:08] **Malia Mason:** They're like, oh, wow, that's super exciting and fun. But also knowing the right people, identifying the right people. To have good relationships with. So identifying maybe the lead platform architect or identifying the lead platform engineer. Getting a good relationship with them cuz they're gonna see.

[00:12:28] **Malia Mason:** Way more of the code and the infrastructure and the backend, and they might be able to see things ahead of time and getting that good relationship with them and identifying key stakeholders within the organization. Maybe someone as a blocker to your security effort. But if you can get some key developers or key engineers who align with you and they can advocate in meetings that you're not a part of.

[00:12:53] **Malia Mason:** Then you're spreading your influence around, around the way. And people were asking , why don't we implement M F A, [00:13:00] that's a best security practice. And then that way it's not coming from my mouth,

it's not coming from the security mouth. Now it's coming from the people who are involved with it. I have buy-in.

[00:13:11] **Malia Mason:** So it can be a way that, getting those we might call them security champions in within the different departments. And then you. Talking with them, and then they can then spread, oh yes, of course we should be using key best security practices. So that can really help. And also just, sometimes you can throw out there oh , I gave a talk on this at this conference, or whatever.

[00:13:33] **Malia Mason:** Sometimes that helps. And then they're like, oh, wow. It's the cool factor, okay. That kind of adds to oh, this person. Probably knows what they're talking about. Like they gave this cool talk at this big conference. So there's a lot of parts that play into it, and I think that's what a lot of folks don't understand about security is it's a lot of people management and even outside of management, it's a lot of talking with users.

[00:13:56] **Malia Mason:** It's a lot having to build relationships. And it's actually why I. Career [00:14:00] switchers who come from like a psych background, like psychology is okay, get inside people's heads and how do you understand emotions and how, like what motivates humans? Those folks do a really good job in cybersecurity cause they can pick up the tech easily.

[00:14:14] **Malia Mason:** Do you know how to interact with your users? Do you know how to talk with them and do you know how to build that trusting relationship with them, because that's the most important thing at the end of the day.

[00:14:25] **Chris:** Pivoting off the interacting with lots of people and also finding the right people to interact with that you mentioned earlier. tell us a little bit how you use networking to advance your career.

[00:14:37] **Malia Mason:** I always tell people networking is the most important aspect in cybersecurity.

[00:14:42] **Malia Mason:** You can learn these tech skills whenever, and honestly, I learned every day. I was just doing some reading last night on a new secret scanning tool, but the networking, knowing people and knowing who's in your back pocket, knowing who you can reach out to, I talked about earlier, it's like [00:15:00] knowing where your limitations are and knowing who can you trust in your network to ask questions about Hey, does anybody know anything about this tool?

[00:15:08] **Malia Mason:** Or, Hey, I have this like, Query that isn't working or Hey, did anybody see this file or whatever. Like having that network and being able to lean on people like outside of your work environment and having those people you can lean on. That's huge. And also for job searching. That's the most critical aspect, especially going into the recession, the job market is gonna be pretty rough for a while.

[00:15:33] **Malia Mason:** There's gonna be a lot of people applying for jobs and. Getting a referral is the best way, especially in our industry where trust is so huge. It's probably the number one. And I'm asked all the time to refer people and I'm always happy to do and it can be a way to get in the back door and get advanced, especially for underrepresented folks.

[00:15:54] **Malia Mason:** A lot of times. We're left behind. And so I do a lot of work in trying to use my network. [00:16:00] I've spent a long time building it. I'm connected with, I think over 5,000 people on LinkedIn and I absolutely like value all those connections and talk with them and especially across all multiple different industries.

[00:16:11] **Malia Mason:** And that's so important and I've been able to help a lot of people get jobs in cybersecurity or career switch or, just. Try to open the doors for them, cuz I know if I ever need help, then they're gonna open the door for me. This is, again, very much cybersecurity is a team effort.

[00:16:27] **Malia Mason:** We all need to stick together. We all need to work together. And that's where the power of having that work network is. If somebody sees something, then they can share it with their fellow cybersecurity folks and then hopefully the lessons learned that they had at their company will prevent anything bad happening at their company.

[00:16:45] **Malia Mason:** It's happen with SolarWinds. We saw whispers of it that weekend that was like, Hey, there might be something happening. You might wanna take a look at SolarWinds. We're hearing whispers of it from FireEye, and I was so grateful to the cyber [00:17:00] community because. I hopped on my weekend, on my day off, and I was like, let me check, just to be sure.

[00:17:05] **Malia Mason:** Sure enough, a couple hours later, news dropped. This is bad news. Everything was getting worse, but I was able to, because of leaning on my network and having that, those connections, was able to go and check my environment and put in some prevent preventative measures, and I was ready to respond to executives when they were pinging me within an hour.

[00:17:25] **Malia Mason:** What's going on? Are we safe? Are we good? And my cybersecurity friends and my network definitely were super helpful then, and that's what I love probably most about the cybersecurity industry, is how collaborative it is and, how everybody does work together. So what I would say is for any future cybersecurity leaders is, humble.

[00:17:46] **Malia Mason:** Know the limits of your knowledge. Know when to reach out, expand your network. Go get outside your comfort zone. I'm supposedly an ambivert. I'm in the middle of introverted and extroverted. I attend networking events. I go [00:18:00] outside my comfort zone. Yep. I have to do the recharge after an event, and I have to go, and recharge my introvert itself.

[00:18:07] **Malia Mason:** It's so important to make those connections and to make those, to build that network and, communicate with your users. Don't be the no fun police. Be the nice security manager that sometimes has to issue out a mandate, but explain why. Take the extra minute or two to explain why your users will think more highly of you and you'll be more approachable.

[00:18:29] **Malia Mason:** You don't want anybody to hide anything from you, so watch the way you communicate things like with your tone. And don't be afraid to try. Don't be afraid to try and fail. I would say for all the underrepresented folks who might be listening is you. My, my journey to manager was definitely not easy.

[00:18:45] **Malia Mason:** I did run across several people who, questioned oh, why should you be leading what you know? But find those leaders and find those hiring managers who recognize your leadership, who recognize that you are a good leader and recognize your potential [00:19:00] and work for. Work for those people and they'll work on your growth and they'll work on your development and you'll be such a better person for it, and you'll be much better off than, just seeking out the Googles or whatever for the title.

[00:19:13] **Malia Mason:** Seek out a good manager. and, get mentors to, men have mentors from all different realms, and not just in your job, but then look who inspires you as a leader. What did they do? What was their pathway to leadership? What did they what kind of jobs did they have?

[00:19:30] **Malia Mason:** What kind of training did they go through? Just don't be afraid to ask for help. If I can do it, anybody else can do it. And I look forward to see the next set of leaders in the cybersecurity industry. Any final

advice for them? You know what, my door's always open. Anybody can connect with me on LinkedIn.

[00:19:45] **Malia Mason:** My door's always open. I'm always happy to talk with folks in who aspire to either get into cybersecurity or especially if they wanna move into a position of leadership. So please don't hesitate to l to reach out and I'm happy to talk with anybody [00:20:00] and try to help out if I can.

[00:20:01] **Chris:** Malia, thank you for coming on to another episode of Breaking into Cybersecurity Leadership.

[00:20:07] **Chris:** Thank you and have a great.

[00:20:09] **Malia Mason:** Thank you for having me. Take care, everybody. Stay safe.