

The Leadership Diet with Paul Byrne

Welcome Paul, so glad you're able to join me.

Paul: Yeah, it's good to be here. Yeah. It's good to see you,

Pod: man. You and I have had the privilege of working together are traveling together in Amsterdam, in Switzerland, in San Francisco, in China and Singapore, and a whole range of places.

And I've no idea how many conference calls would was being on over the last number of years. One thing I have a consistent memory of with you in that process is you talk about the return to wholeness as a leadership journey. And in fact, indeed of the human journey. But the returns journey suggest as a starting point to the journey.

So can I get you to go back to your starting point back to Boston where you grew up and how that shaped you on your own journey?

Paul: Yeah, sure. it's, in some of the work we've done together, we, we'll often include this idea of origin stories. which of course, for the superhero fans, we all know that, to understand, Superman, you have to understand his origin story is pretty important as this guy flying around.

Yeah. What's the deal with kryptonite. and I think, for a lot of us. and in particular, when we work with leaders and I'll talk about that mind, but I'm really understanding what's that origin story. and how did those early influences begin to shape my experience?

Usually in beautiful ways, the human being that sort of emerges and develops since, so for mine, Oh, gosh, we often do this exercise where we get folks in the evening to tell their origin stories. And these are those conversations that can go to all the we hours in the morning if you let them.

But I think, some of the more certain points of minor, I grew up in the U S I've lived. Most of my professional life in Europe, but actually grew up in Boston, a working class suburb of Boston. And you know what, I think one of the most important influences for me was, growing up with dyslexia and probably add or any number of things.

And at that time, and the 19 avenues in Boston and, in the kind of school I was at, you're just diagnosis. Was he slow? Rice, and you tended to get put in a classroom, for others, slow kids. And that could be everything from someone with a slight learning disability to, extreme autism.



But it was a way of taking you out of the mainstream. So you don't slow things down and some of my earlier memories are like not fitting in, I would say that was a theme. There was a sort of sense of where I was put wasn't. Maybe intuitively I knew it's not necessarily where I belonged probably true for a lot of the people in that room, but, and I don't think I made any conscious choice about it, but as I reflect back, there was this sort of sense of, I need to keep my distance, I need to not be too consumed by this world.

Or I'll lose myself to it, and it was for the sake of a phenomenal sixth grade teacher, mr. Troy, who, suffered polio as a child. And was this hulking scary? Figure in the school and he brought me back, and so it's a, another amazing story of a teacher and, these sort of angels on the path as a result, part of the origin story is be careful about groups.

keep to yourself the system isn't there to help you, it's there to be navigated, and it's of course, fast forward, whatever it is, 40 years or something or more, it gives you a real sense of kind of systems thinking, is what would call it today. But at the time it was more of a, how does a boy.

in a big world, figure out how to get through it without getting consumed by it,

Pod: And they had, the irony is of course, as you said, fast forward, 40 years, whatever it is, you are now an expert in groups and insistence and helping systems here, which is the one that the heirs you were avoiding way back then.

Paul: I always, I always like to think that often the work you are called to do in the world is the work to do for yourself. And so of course, the irony of focusing on teams and working with leaders around enhancing relationship for somebody who's struggled with being in relationship my whole life is, there's a certain poetic irony to, you know, who better to advise you than me, because I've done it wrong every way you can. And how funny that you're and how funny that you're asking me? No, he's here. He's a 10 mistake relationship.

Pod: Here's the 10 mistakes. I know.

Paul: I like to think.

Yeah. If anything else I can be a cautionary tale. There's always something to gain.

Pod: Funny. You mentioned that teacher called mr. Troy. I just had a sudden flashback to assist a sister breeder. Who was my sixth class. None. I completely forgotten this too. You said it, who took me aside one day and said, you've got great talent at all.

Understanding people's sensitivities until you manage your own. If they're always going to hurt you. And I've just realized that how right she was and how insightful she was. And I would have been. 10, maybe, a boy back then and she's right. They've already understood. I fully understood her wisdom way back then.

Yeah.

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Paul: these, for those of us that are lucky enough to have a sister Brita or a David Troy, on our path, I there's, when I think about who, who have been the coaches in my life, and by that, I don't mean the sort of professionally trained or, but.

there was this, and I, we've talked a little bit about this idea of unlocking moves, but there was this unlocking move that he allowed for me, which was to create a new identity. I, I wasn't, broken. I was just stuck, and that there was actually no reason in the world that I couldn't stay in his classroom.

Yeah. and, everyone up until then had told me that I don't belong in the classrooms, and just the have, and I remember, went home in tears every day. he was in my mind a tyrant and in retrospect, just, exactly what I needed. And I think he knew that. And, Yeah.

It's always touching to think back to that memory. Cause it's one of those moments where you think the trajectory completely changed. the path forward without him is decidedly different than the path I walked rotten, that's

Pod: yeah. You mentioned unlucky move and I want to jump out and you for a minute because you've got a really cool website called unlucky move.com and she shared some great stories on that based on your leadership insights.

But before we jump there, You talked about your formative experience in Boston. How did that show up for you in your leadership roles? I'm thinking of a one stage. You headed up corporate exec board in Europe, that was a pretty geographically wide roll out of Boston shape you then relative to who you are now,

Paul: how does Boston shape anyone?

Exactly. You get an attitude and a, exactly what's the sarcasm and the Irish new Yorkers driving everyone away. Exactly. Italian humor. Yeah. it's interesting. it's it definitely did. And I'd say it probably has more to do with kind of the learning disability than Boston, so to speak.

Although Boston kind of, there's a lot of STEM up stand up comedians that come out of Boston and most of them tend to have a bit of an edge to them. So I think, part of, part of. What you learn in that environment is you get fixed skin, which is another way of saying you can go pretty distant, right?

So you don't let anyone hurt you. And it's like the point of friendship is to see who can take down each year. It's a brutal, like when people move to Boston, when they're young, they're like, Jesus, you guys are friends. it's just a nonstop competition to see who can come up with a better put down.

But anyway, the, if, and again, this is the benefit of hindsight and having some frameworks to think through. when I think about, coming back to this idea of wholeness and, my



hypothesis, which is, for a lot of us, for most of us, there are aspects of ourselves, our personality, often our gifts.

That we decide early in life, don't have a place in that world or make things more complicated for me, or aren't appreciated, and we push those into the shadow or we subdued. and I think for me, it was as I worked through school and with the learning disability, I think there's a kind of a strategy that I deployed, which was one, no one's going to get in and I won't be hurt, And so I think that, in our terminology, when we look at the leadership circle, that's the sort of protecting yeah. There was definitely a wall. and then there was this parallel strategy, which was, and I'll prove them all wrong, probably using slightly stronger words. Then that is a as a 15 year old.

But, so which is that controlling, the idea is to win, to be better. you know what, you never let me at the table. I'm not only gonna be the smartest one at the table, but I'm going to show the table. Cool. That you're you don't belong here. Yeah, exactly. And so I think for a lot of my career, and a lot of the leadership roles, it was very much about good strategic thinking.

So that power of. Taking distance on things, seeing systems noticing kind of problems around the corner and achieving, getting things done, winning, all in the preservation of my own sense of identity. I won't be hurt, show them wrong, and man, that can run you for a while.

it's certainly not something that's going to bring a letter joy of your life, but, yeah, you can make a lot of people, a lot of money and you'll get a lot of recognition for it. And, and for me, the part that I think until I started getting into coaching and this leadership journey that was always in the shadow was, the broken part of me that could see the broken part of others, so this sort of compassion, and I know what it feels like to, Be excluded to be different, to struggle.

And I think it was a part of myself that I for a long time. And, and then I think as a coach, as you bring that back and you can combine that with the ability to see things, the desire to move things forward, that's really when. I wish I could say I figured that out in my kind of classic leadership roles, I don't think I did.

I don't know that I was particularly good leader. I got a lot done

Pod: the way you describe that person is not unique to Paul Bern. That would be a very. Common and regularly promoted leader in many organizations, as you get stuff done, you make money, you're smart, et cetera, right up to the point where you no longer can or right up to the point where you burn your people out or you're burning yourself out or your family, cetera, and then suddenly to use the other phrase.

Are you okay? Then you need an unlocking move kind to be able to shift your paradigm and shift how you do stuff. What is an unlucky move?

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Paul: Yeah, that's a good question. so I'll tell you how I think about it. Cause there's definitely a, in the world of kind of developmental psychology and adult stage development, they referenced this.

I know Bob Keegan, I think. maybe even use the term in some of his books, but the, for me, and again, this has been my own personal lived experience. And also the experience I've noticed with leaders is that, development doesn't ha doesn't tend to happen in the sort of straight linear ways.

8% better per quarter, over 15 quarters. happens in bumps and leaps. my census particularly one year have moved beyond issues of competency. do you know how to do the job? if you're a CFO and you've struggled with accounting, there's no amount of unlocking moves.

That's good, help there. for most of the folks that I think we work with that, you could argue there. they're the best in the business at what they do. And the developmental leap is really the, the mindset, it's an often, it's, what's the story you tell yourself about yourself.

In what ways is that story constraining? Some of them, the best parts of you, no doubt. It's a story that served you. we wouldn't be yeah. In this conversation, if it didn't, so let's acknowledge and celebrate the eight year old or the 16 year old that decided to build this story.

Because, man, all the paths you could have gone, this is a pretty good one! But now it's as an adult, a father, as a husband, a leader, what's actually the story that feels more true and allows for more of you to come through?

We talked about this idea of wholeness. I think it's true for organizations. I think it's true for people. It's this movement towards, " can a more complete expression of who I am over time continue to emerge"? The best leaders I've known don't hide those parts. In fact, those parts that they may be hidden for a long time, end up becoming their sort of signatures...

whether it's vulnerability or, compassion or a big heart or being more powerful.

for a lot of leaders, the unlocking move is not about, people it's about, I need to re learn that power isn't corruption. You know that, powerful people aren't by definition, bad. And that actually in order to make changes in the world, I need to have more of my power expressed, even though I recognize that always comes with an edge, and maybe powerful people in my background, didn't always use their power appropriately.

And, but that doesn't mean that's the case for me.

Pod: If I understand you, What you're saying is leaders have a certain level say technical skills or horizontal level skills. They're the entry point to the role, but they're the true development happens in the way they upgrade or change their mindset or their way of thinking or the storytelling that allows them to access a different level of effectiveness or a different level of impact or a greater version of themselves.

We stand leads to a different level of impact or effectiveness.

Paul: Really well said. No, exactly. I think it's, where's the leveraged move, I, half the leaders, we were like, I don't know, could they be 3% smarter? could they go from like the 98th percentile to the 99th percentile in terms of IQ?

Maybe it wouldn't make a difference. Probably not. But often it's in the, how do you make sense of it? And as you look at. The environment and in particular, are you reacting to it or from it? And I think that's one of the, one of the big unlock he moves that will often work with, and you and I work with leaders around this, which is this move to self authoring, mind this sense that I both being created and creating at the same time, the reality I have it, I'm not just reacting to the situation I find myself in.

And, a lot of young leaders. Understandably. and appropriately, so are reacting to an environment that they're in. and I think as leaders mature, they begin to realize that it's a little more complicated than that they're actually creating the environment as well as

Pod: So I know you talk about the idea of inescapable questions as a kind of a precursor to the unlucky move. I'm asking a question that can hide from. Puts you into the place where this unlucky move emerges are, becomes more obvious. Good. Can you tell us more about that?

Paul: Yeah. So these are the questions that kind of, they haunt it's you can't, unask it, and you think to yourself like, Oh, damn that person for, and for me, they tend to sound things like up until now rather.

what are you now unwilling to tolerate? In your life. The reason I think of it as an inescapable question is it's, we all tolerate things in our lives and like appropriately, like we have to live in a system, it in with people. And so part of that is, you probably call it compromise.

and there's probably also something closer to the edge of things so that, for the last 30 years, this is what I've tolerated is me playing small or this being this way. And actually I'm noticing I'm not willing to tolerate in any longer. I don't know what to do about that. And I'm actually maybe even scared of what the repercussions could be.

but this idea of, refusing to tolerate either my own inaction or situations. I think that's a big one. I think it's certainly an apropos one now. globally with certainly in my home country, in terms of, Racial justice and this sort of sense of, how have systems and individuals, tolerated a set of conditions that they say they don't want, and yet are in very real ways, part of what it is it right.

And yeah. how do I tolerate the thing that I say I don't want, but actually, either intentionally or unintentionally, contribute to, and, Yeah. So those would be those kinds of questions. And I've always had a few good ones.

Pod: I remember being in a room with you, or maybe let's say four or five years ago, and you asking the group, which I was part of it phase, like something needs to be voiced, but none of you are willing to say it.

And I remember at the time the question landing and taught me like a, Oh my God. That is an extraordinary challenging question. And I don't feel challenged as in aggressiveness is I need to step up to this question because I'm part of this group. That's not voicing whatever this conversation was.

Can't remember what, but it led me. And the group to really getting into a far different conversation, a far better conversation. I'm Oran conversation, not necessarily a more comfortable conversation, there's a whole problem. but about what I remember was the power of the question really unlocked. The conversation that needed to happen.

and I think that's what you talk about. When you talk about the unlocking moves, there is something that needs to be shifted for you then to move to a different level of in our case conversation and probably capability over all as a result of that.

Paul: No, it's a great appointment and we've used this and in groups together, but this idea of, even just.

asking a team, what's the essential conversation that you as a team are unwilling. Yeah. it's amazing what comes out, there's usually five of them, but there's something somehow about the question actually forces the answer. Yeah. Cause it wouldn't sort of surface on its own.

And so I don't mean to say that, I don't want to trap people or Trump teams questions, but I think that there are some of these questions that you want to put forward that, these leaders are so smart. they know how to get themselves out hot water. Yeah. And yeah. Can you frame questions and conversation that don't have easy back exits.

It's no. You're going to go through this. That's why

Pod: we're here.

Paul: It's important. Yeah.

Pod: Yeah. Yeah. So there's a bit of it paradox there then in the sense of, a lot of, there's a lot of writing, a lot of books, a lot of articles that talk about positive psychology and staying optimistic and the power of all of that.

And yet a few minutes ago you talked about developmental happens in bursts and plateaus and it can be uncomfortable. W what's your view on the, maybe the pros and cons of the pop psychology of the positive psychology in relationship to this unlucky move and it's need to be uncomfortable to be able to unlock it.

Paul: That's a good question. listen, I'm all in favor of, Positivity and I prefer to be there, but I think, from a developmental perspective, and I think we know this, when we think about ourselves, some of our biggest sources of growth moments weren't necessarily in that moment, fairly easy or comfortable or where we want it to be.

whether it's, Holiday going wrong or getting lost or having your heartbroken, these things that are, challenges that build us, there's, the whole concept of human beings are antifragile, in that when they get disrupted, they actually get stronger.

They don't break often. And so almost. Psychology is almost an anti-fragile element. the learning can come from darker moments, the, the difficult, challenges as well as, the high points and the peak experience. and I think when you're looking for these unlocking moves or.

I'm looking for moments in time where certain stories just became embedded. I think if you avoid the sort of the negative. Yeah. And I know most folks in the coaching space wouldn't do that. But, I think for leaders in particular, when you stay away from negative emotion, because you're afraid of going death, you take 50%.

of the potentiality off the table. Just statistically, it's not a great thing. Move it's man, if you did that, if you took 50% of your market off the table and you'd still have to have the same revenue targets, you'd think you're insane. But yeah, mental standpoint, I think emotion both positive and, and difficult.

Are, it's just it's fodder for the yeah. for the development process. Yeah.

Pod: I saw a quote from Susan David, the South African psychologist who's who does a lot of work in Harvard and a lot of work on an emotional agility. she talked about only dead people. Never get unwanted emotions. the stress of life is the starting point to a meaningful life, which goes to your point here, is it meaningful, has got to be both positive and that the stressors and together, they give you the whole sense of meaningful in the whole sense of growth.

Paul: Exactly. Exactly.

Pod: let's double down a little bit into maybe examples of leadership. you've been in this space where you've been cultivating leaders working alongside, as you said, some of the smartest people in the planet to do great work every day, and yet they still can elevate their impact.

What patterns do you notice about leaders who are able to continue to elevate their impact? Or maybe even the opposite leaders who are, could have the potential, but just haven't done it yet. And there's a passion to it.

Paul: That's a good question. I, the obvious kind of quick answers is this is self-awareness right?



So it, it is, this. Goes back to the Greeks and probably earlier than that somehow, but yeah, this idea of unexamined life of the ability to take perspective, to see myself in the world, not be so consumed by the world, that everything, it's the fish and the goldfish in the water, syndrome.

one of the things that we'll first work with a leader and in particular team on is, are they able to take perspective, a lot of the agile principles, things like running retrospectives. there's a lot of sort of structured ways that teams do that, but I think it has developmental level, can teams and leaders begin to see a more nuanced realities around them?

what's actually happening. I had a, It was actually a conversation yesterday. And it was a leader who was promoted to a leadership team, and a leader who was on the team was demoted. And, there was a situation where part of that demoted leaders team was going to join. This new leaders team and his group.

So it was a little bit, it was tricky and we had a conversation and there's eight people on the team. And his first comment to me was, I found it interesting. Only one person sent me a note after the announcement. like good luck, and, and I could tell he was hurt.

and it also felt personal. It was about them and about him. And in the conversation where we went was, okay, let's just step back from it and notice that even in this situation where it's just eight people. People found it difficult to congratulate you at the same time that a trusted and respected peer was being asked to leave.

It's how do I do that? And so what might that signal further down in the organization? these, this is a team that is responsible for probably 10,000 people. So as that amplifies down, in what ways are people uncomfortable about talking about this? what else isn't being said?

And so we used it as this. A very personal kind of felt experience of wow, I would have appreciated a little bit more congratulations too. Isn't that interesting? really decent people found it difficult to congratulate me on this new role. What might that actually be representing?

Yeah. and where actually might that show up where we actually need to get the work done. And so led to a whole different conversation. I think this ability to take perspective and examine it doesn't mean that. The deeper meaning is necessarily the truer one. But to recognize that, within the noise, there are lots of signals and often leaders will pay attention to the one that we're trying to here.

And they don't hear the others that actually could be really impactful for them. And I think as a coach, part of our job, I can't interpret them. I'm not someone you've come to for business advice, but I think I can help you. discern what other signals might be mixed in there that you haven't traditionally paid attention to, but actually it could be whole new sources of data and insight.

Pod: In that example of what was, what I'm hearing you say is you helped that guy understand that they had a reaction to, Hey, I'm a bit upset people that haven't congratulated me and unlocking it, allowed him to see that. This data here that could be a far bigger story that you need to tend to, and potentially it is leads go in and be aware of because you're now in service of that.

Paul: Yeah. Yeah. And it's allowed to be about you. So go ahead. You can have that conversation with your colleagues. Don't let it only be about you. Yeah. and that's the, I think that's part of what unlocks is. it's both true for you and at a just interpersonal level and maybe there's something to attend to.

it's also true at a systemic level. And as a leader, that's actually more interesting frankly, than. Do you know whether or not someone sent you an email on the first 48 hours, because then you can actually start attending to something that, over time could actually become an issue, right?

Pod: Yeah. Yeah. You mentioned Bob Keegan a few minutes ago from Harvard and you and I have worked with Bob Anderson from leadership circle for many years. And they both talk about, in different ways, are the emotions having you. Are you having them or in Bob's case, coming from a reactor space or coming from the creative space.

And I think a wall, I think what your example he illustrates is you're trying to help that leader move from an automatic, reactive space off I'm upset to yes, you can be. And. Also listen to the language and then therefore you can come from a creative space as well, which is truly unlocking that potential for his leadership there.

Paul: Oh, it's beautiful. yeah. just to use sort of leadership circle language, I'd say it's this, initial high complying. High critical. If they didn't send me a note, does that mean I don't belong? Do I not fit in? And, what does that say about them? That they didn't maybe, I don't know them as well as I thought, maybe they aren't as, Oh, Oh, is that how it's going to be here at the top? that kind of quality and that unlocking mood, move to systems awareness and self awareness actually. Let me get curious about this and isn't it interesting that it had such an emotional, a reaction in me. And can I put the personal nature of that to the side for the moment and actually almost pick that up as a, like a window, picking up a wind and it's wow, like, Where else is that happening?

systems awareness, what does that say about me? Oh, isn't that interesting? It matters so much. And like, how's that going to influence difficult conversations that we're going to need to have as a team? Cause if I'm looking for a Pat on the back, instantaneous with anything positive that I do, I'm probably in the wrong place, So I think getting them to think in those more creative ways, just end up having the situation be much higher leverage than just Like to your point, like now I need to react to it. I feel bad and I'll either shut down or I'll, I'll tell them that they were wrong.

those are not always helpful.



Pod: You often talk about the down and out move as an example, or maybe even a regular example. I was suspect of an unlucky move for leaders. Can you just walk us through that and maybe even have an example that she had a straight out with one of the leaders you've been working

Paul: with.

It's a, again, it's, w without having the visual it's the down and out makes sense, because it plays out on the leadership circle profiles. So people who know that kind of, and typically with leaders and it's very common. It's a, and I'll just, yeah, I'll use the leadership circle terminology just for the sake of clarity.

But the, it often starts with the leader who is really purpose driven, is it believes in the vision of the company and the mission thinks that makes a positive connection into the world and cares. this isn't a sort of nine to five and I punch out and, do my side hustle where my passion really lies, that they've invested and they commit a lot of their life's blood to this organization and what this organization is trying to accomplish.

And so that's yeah, a, a precondition. And then. Often they tend to be incredibly intellectually gifted. you just be, frankly, it's hard to make it to the top of any enterprise of any significance without. Having your share of brains, right? the IQ is typically there and it's it didn't show up at 35.

So these are just, these are people who, probably since seven years old had the right answer or the smart one in the class, all the things I wasn't by the way, which is 35, actually asking me anything, I'm sure there's a reactive sense of me that takes a certain pleasure from a ha you thought you were so bright.

Now you have to talk to them. I was

Pod: just upset to get in trouble. That's a Brita. Totally,

Paul: exactly. David Troy. the, so what ends up happening is that, they see things that aren't working in the organization. They tend to see them sooner and more vividly than anyone else. And they typically speak out about it.

They're like, Hey, we're not structured the right way, or we shouldn't be doing this way. Or, here's this massive inefficiency. And even the way we think about the marketplace, And the rest of the organization, it doesn't really know what to do with them. Probably doesn't see it.

often again, these folks are seeing things much sooner. And so that's the down, which is they go critical, and I always think of the reactive tendencies. And I think Steve, athe a colleague of ours. Talks about them as these, anxiety management systems that there are one of the places we go when the world becomes, like we get filled with sort of that steam and the pressure builds, and we're going to do something and the down and outs cycle is critical.

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So it's noticing things aren't happening the way they should. And then there's typically two directions leaders go and some actually managed to do both. The first one is down and, again, looking at the leadership circle to the left, which is this move towards, distance. And that sounds something like, they don't get it.

I've told them a hundred times. I'm not going to say it 101 times. If, once they figure out that I was right, they know where to find me, And so they've drifted from distance right. Into passive, which I think is the highest inverse correlation. it makes sense. Sort of the opposite of leading.

Yeah. Yeah. And they unintentionally and ironically, because they're so passionate, they go into the yeah, exactly. they end up in passing, which is the last place and they're always surprised in their profile. Like, how's that even possible? no one has ever described me as passive the other way as they can I'm down and out to the right, which is moving more into sort of arrogance.

And that tends to sound like, conversation with a spouse over a glass of wine, the I'm surrounded by and nobody gets it. And I misunderstood. As our spouses often do, they jump on our side and defend us. You're right. you are smarter. Yeah.

Pod: Don't see the value of you.

Paul: Exactly. So probably not the best conversation, but, and then, the reality is once they've discounted people. So if I'm surrounded by idiots, but this is still important, I guess I better do it myself. And that's that drift into autocratic. And so these autocratic and passive traps that leaders.

Very unwittingly get into because they didn't see a coming and it wasn't the initial thing. They did. I think critical was that first move something that's happening. That shouldn't be, but they didn't know how to bring it through that, in our model, the authenticity, how do I tell truth to an organization and actually look at both myself?

So self-awareness. How am I partly responsible for the fact that this isn't changing? What is it about the way that I'm communicating it, that doesn't allow people to hear it and that, would bleed down into relating or systems awareness, which is where are we stop? what's the repeating pattern that seems to be unbreakable.

And how do I begin to experiment with. Bold choices that might disrupt that pattern. And so that's systems thinker down into, achieving strategic focus. what's a new story that needs to evolve. And so no one leaders can move out of that sort of anxiety management, but totally understandable.

But almost always derails them into sort of a different way of experiencing the same, the same situation with more curiosity. and I may, I might be misquoting this, but I think even from a brain research standpoint, you can't be curious and anxious at the same time. But there's some.

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Yeah. And so this, I always say what do you do when you're anxious? I'd be like, get curious about why you're anxious. And you're likely to find that the anxiety dissipates your, it might be just a brain trick, but it seems to work. Yeah.

Pod: But what you've outlined for the leader listening to this is if they find themselves in that emotive or anxious passion, where they move into.

That's all done. I'm tired of trying so hard, call me or I'll do it myself or any variation of that. Yeah. Step is recognize it. Get out of that anxiety moment if into the self awareness piece, but then move into that in almost inescapable question. how can I raise a question about our patterns as an organization or how can I help these people to move into it?

And by doing that. As opposed to standing anxiety moment, they are more likely to get the outcome they want. Anyway,

Paul: that's it? how many times have people gone home? And we all know this in ourselves, right? Either on the train or in the commute or something where we either think I'm surrounded by it.

It's no one gets it or, I give up, sometimes you gotta, when the lose the battle to win the war, some battles aren't worth fighting or whatever. rationale you use, but I, I think for leaders when they noticed that story is emerging in them, just to catch it because, give yourself 15 minutes, no, that's fine.

it's like a warm bed. It's don't say, you will get all wrinkly. If you stay there too long searches, human and enjoy the, the self righteousness of it for a short period and then, figure out what you're going to do.

Pod: But one of my old professors. Tony grant who passed away already this year, he used to say, yeah, have a warm bath with milk, but don't stay too long.

Cause then he would start smelling. Yeah. Enjoy it for a little bit. For not too long.

Paul: All things in moderation. My grandmother used to say,

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I greatly appreciate it. Let's shift the story to a very different one. When I first came across your name, I think was in Debra Roland's books, still moving where I think she referenced to you as part of the team. And that was working with her. It's a great book for anyone who's interested in a larger scale transformation, but particularly in system.

Awareness the system thinking and nudging the system, if I'm right and under and remembering the story where the book was written about, or it was based on was a large German nuclear energy organization that was shifting it's a way of working products was, an



organization that was asked to be entrepreneurial yet is working in a very bureaucratic, nuclear energy sector.

And you got to come in and help navigate that.

Paul: Yeah. Yeah. and Deb is a, it was a great teacher of mine and, yet another one of those people who, when you come across there's the work I did before I met Deb. And then the work I do after having that debt, is richer.

And yeah, and, she, she does a wonderful, again, her book, she does a great job of calling out these principles. And even, I think going into that example of the. The energy company, I think one of the, I came in probably with a overly psychological approach.

That's like somehow if the leaders could change and make better choices and show up differently and develop that, that would be sufficient. and I think what I learned from dab in particular, working with this client over multiple years, God, I think we ran, 50 programs. w so we really got to know their senior leaders is that leadership is embedded in a context.

we'll say that leadership circles, and that context is, The systemic influences that are both under your control and completely out of your control. So it's this idea of, sailing from, Portugal to New York and the irony of you actually have to sail down the West coast of Africa and then up.

through the Caribbean to get there. cause the winds and the currents, if you try and just cut straight across, you'll just never make it. or it'll just be so definitely long that you won't have time. and I think organism change is a little bit the same that. The distance from point a to point B can look to see really close and absent any undercurrents and Tradewinds it may be.

It is. And so it's worth experimenting with, some change efforts or just about doing things differently. My experiences with large complex multi-stakeholder influences, It isn't that way, And so this idea of being able to read the system, not just the system in the organization, in terms of, how are we structured?

How do we do things, the external system, I think that particularly for enterprise leaders, that's more and more, where they need to look, how is the market, how regulators competitors. Society. how is that creating headwinds and tailwinds and how do we begin to navigate the organization to take advantage of them or at least to mitigate the, the cost of it.

And, yeah, so it was a, it was an enlightening, couple of years, working with Deb and her team that really brought to light, this important of, how do you really bring that systems thinking in? and in fact, recognize that most big. Complex change is about shifting systems.

and you have to do the right leadership thing. so the things need to compliment that, but boy system wins is my experience. Even my ex and my examples are phenomenal leaders from one organization who go to another organization and fail dramatically. And it happens

all the time and it's because their leadership is worse or they weren't doing the right things there.

They embedded themselves in a system that completely overruled. Yeah. and, and you see it and I know you do a lot of work with transitions and yeah. New CEOs coming in and boy, that's it. If you're not watching out for that. yeah. And they're all invisible

Pod: things.

Paul: culture.

Pod: One of my mentors years ago, Peter Hawkins in bath, in England, he always said to me, you put a great leader in a bad system that they can change.

The system always wins no matter what. And therefore, how do you help the leader to start recognizing the system as quick as they can? Is it easy, is the only way to give them a sense of it. So with that mind, then how does a leader start listening to the system?

Paul: Yeah. w and again, we've already mentioned Deb's book, shoot.

She goes into quite a bit of detail on the inner, and she did a lot of research around that, what are these inner practices? these inner competencies that leaders have, the ones. so self-awareness. again, comes back. Can I take, I guess is what I'd say and can I use that perspective to gain insight?

And can I integrate that insight into my art actions moving forward, personal learner, right? Like it's one thing to do just like, Oh, I noticed that happened and they just keep doing it. It's another. So I noticed that happened. That's not ideal. Let me experiment with something different and. Going to shape and change the way my leadership looks.

Yeah. So I think that's one, I think another, especially in this moment is, pay attention to emotional hotspots. they're, they're often where, it's like these, in Yellowstone park, in the U S the geysers, they often are aware the, all of the turbulence and power underneath the surface pops up and.

And it's often in uncharacteristic behavior, isn't that odd this team did this, or I never would have thought this, the leader would have said something like that. And so I think a systems lens would say might actually just be interruption of something much bigger. So how is what's going on underneath that leader or what this team is trying to navigate?

how might that Seemingly uncharacteristic or out of character. Yeah. Action. Yeah. Be something deeper than that. And something. So it's really that kind of paying attention to what shows up and treating it all as potential data. A lot of it's noise and that's part of the leadership job is to discern the two, but yeah, emotional hotspots.

And then, and this day, particularly emotions that aren't necessarily considered positive. So there's a lot of, There's a lot of grief. again, we had talked about, some of the, the racial



justice issues and some of the social justice issues, particularly in the U S right now, that are, hard, to confront, our representative and I think signals of something much deeper that needs attention.

you can criticize a protest if you want, but actually what it's representing and what lies underneath it is. much is something that's important to attend to the, yeah. So I would say that those are a couple of the places that I would look as look for the emotional hotspots

Pod: they did.

The hotspot study is fascinating. I think Colbert has taught us this in a completely non-leadership emotional way. If you look at the countries who have, who are managing covert, what they are doing is managing the virus outbreaks in hotspots in terms of postcodes. And why is this postcard getting more?

Cases and other postcodes and the BioTracker as the folks who are ringing around to figure out where have those people being are figuring out such a cluster hotspots somewhere because three or four people were in the same venue. And then that became super spreader. So I suspect what you've just described.

We're learning that in a very different environment today with a pandemic, same leadership, discipline applies. Go through the hotspots. They're uncomfortable. Figure out what's going on there sometimes it's noise, but actually sometimes it's a really shit going on there that if you understand that you can try and solve for

Paul: it.

Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. And often, something, I'll give you an example and I think, and again, I think, Deb might talk about it in her book, but, at this energy company that there were these sort of two, two big things that are happening. So the first thing was a huge focus on innovation.

And how do we get an innovation team started? And of course, from when you think about energy, it's actually one of the most interesting and potentially innovative areas, w whether we look at electric vehicles or just the future of non-carbon producing energy.

And the energy space is a sexy place to be at the moment. Who knew, Silicon Valley is interested. It's you'll get invited to the right parties. It's it's okay to be an energy company. I used to be boring now. It's so there's that aspect. And then you have, in the case of this client, this idea of.

The reality, which is much of the energy is, using, lignite or Brown coal, or less environmentally responsible, ways of using energy. And so this sort of paradox of, we both need to. Innovate and move into the green energy and yeah, the reality, which is our whole history as an organization has been built on a foundation of this, of coal, and how do we allow ourselves to both end that part?



to give it its due. It's a place in history to not make it wrong. It wasn't what it was. And we made choices at a time where maybe we didn't know as much, or maybe we made the wrong choice, but this idea of organizations noticing where are things dying and where are they growing and to be able to give both attention, I think allow, I think the extent that you can end things well will predetermine how.

Effectively, you can start new things. Yeah. And I think, for a lot of folks and organizations, there's this desire to only talk about the future and the positive aspects of where we're going and innovation and, I in any organization or family or the individual, there are other parts that need to be attended to which may be are falling away and don't have as big a place, but need to be respected.

Pod: Yeah, it's certainly a mistake. I see many new, C level CEOs or any businesses leader who comes in from the outside. It join a business, our takeover and our organization, and that is rushing to embrace the future, but not honoring the past, even if they, you were given a mandate, even if they're brought in with a specific mandate.

To get ready for the future. Not I'm not honoring the past me. They are all virtually dishonoring, everybody other team who was there as part of the past. And it's a very over, and it's a genuine mistake in the sense that the leader doesn't intend to do that, but their speed to us, to the future without acknowledging the reason we're here is because of where we came from and the great work you did to get us here.

Is often misunderstood as a very blatant disregard for our history.

Paul: Yeah. Yeah. as the great social scientists, Bruce Springsteen said, we can, we can either be, ghosts or ancestors, and so we can be ghosts to who torment and, and haunt. The next generation, or we can be ancestors who resource and support and enable them.

And I think this idea of ending and beginning is so important. and I think, it doesn't just play out in a, on a highway in New Jersey, but, I think it's true in organizations, we'll hear legacy, be a goal or an ancestor. Yeah. and there's plenty of. Yeah.

Pod: Speaking of legacies, our heard you on another podcast with Joel, from coaches rising a few weeks ago, along with, Bruce and Tammy who were senior leaders in the Roche healthcare organization. And you and I have been. Part of a three or four year long program where we were working with Roche.

So in that podcast, you and Tammy, Bruce described in great detail, the whole history of that program and how it started. So for anyone who's interested in that story and that whole topic and how indeed an organization decides to or emerges on what, as an extorting transformation, go to the coaches, rising podcasts, and you hear the whole story over there.

What I'm interested in asking you, Paul though, is I know you were one of the early folks involved in creating the potted and then in koala co architecting, I became this great program. My question is either as a leader in an organization who is trying to enable or lead,

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a transformation of some kind or in day some on the outside who is there to try and help them.

What is needed on behalf of that person to participate or how to show up that then enables our catalyzes. What becomes a transformation?

Paul: Yeah, I'm pausing. Cause it's such a, it's such a big question that I wish I had a, I wish I had a right answer to, it would save an awful lot of people, an awful lot of time.

Pod: Cause I suspect the answer is not the obvious. I suspect the answer is more about who you be as opposed to the gray strategy and what you do.

Paul: Yeah. Yeah. so yeah, the obviously, not the, obviously the things that have become self-evident, having done this is if you go in say any large scale chain, it doesn't have to be a 94,000 person multinational, It could be. Small family business. But the idea that if you cannot go in any longer, I think with a clear set of here are the eight steps that we're going to take to get from a to B. I think the oral changes is changing too fast. Technology is changing too fast. You've got these black Swan events like COVID whatever's next.

that'll always impact that. And so I think this idea of taking an emergent approach. Which I think frees up consultants and coaches a great deal, because you don't need to have answers to things you couldn't possibly have answers to. but what you do need to do is, set a specific course of travel.

So I think this idea, and sometimes we'll talk about this as a what's the frame. So what's the from, to what's the big movement that we don't know how we're going to make. We actually don't even know. All of what's going to be required to make it, but how do we make that? And so in the case that ed Roshan and many other organs, at a high level, there was this sense of becoming a more agile enterprise.

this ability for a big complex organization that runs off of very long term. R and D cycles. how do you become more nimble? How do you begin to respond to the needs of customers? The needs of patients and, having a CEO who had a vision around, what do you term as a person utilized healthcare?

So this idea that medicine can be increased singly, personalized through the use of. Emerging diagnostic techniques and emerging, drugs and medicines. So that was this, point on the horizon, is we need to somehow be more of that. And then I think that they set up a few more hard rules, which is we're going to experiment a lot.

We're going to build in a toleration for experimentation. So one of the things that we did there that I think was important at the very beginning was. We brought the executive team into the process of this, program that we're running culture. And he says that was, targeting the top two or 300 liters there.



And actually had them design themselves. Around, how are they going to respond when people start trying things differently? So you're saying you want people to be more innovative. You want more innovation and ideas and change to happen down in the organization. So how are you going to be intentional about not stifling that because and all it takes in a board presentation is one roll of the eye or one look away, one red marker on

Pod: the property slide.

Paul: You don't really want this. Yeah, exactly. and, to their credit, they did a great job of actually coming up with a set of, I think it was times seven or eight principals. And, and they participated in the program and would, there were involved as a stakeholder and a, when we were short, always, make sure we sent out the reminder of, remember what we agreed to, and, and they really embraced it.

And I think. The two things combined of senior leaders experimenting re-imagining what's possible with the top team. Not necessarily endorsing it yet because there was these aren't necessarily endorsing bubble ideas, but encouraging, like I get this as difficult. I can imagine this is going to require a tremendous amount of change, much of that.

We're not sure if we could do. But we want to encourage the direction you're headed. I keep going, and, so I think, those two things feel important. I don't mean to say that you always have to have the executive team fully on board. it's certainly always helps, but having, I think senior leaders design themselves around.

How they're going to react when members of their team start coming with very bold, very courageous, sometimes misguided ideas. And, cause they can shut that whole thing down right away. Or they can keep the possibility open and actually mentor and sponsor and help direct. Yeah.

Pod: So it's the vision for possibility.

How do you keep leaning into that?

Paul: Yeah.

Pod: coming to the end of our conversation. and I'm interested in, we're recording this in August, 2020, clearly 2020 has been an extraordinary year for everybody in the world on many levels, but particularly for leaders in the world who have probably been, confronted with the most complexity of their careers, I would imagine because it intersects with the complexity of their lives at the same time.

I'm wondering, what are you noticing about leaders who are managing to navigate well at the moment, in terms of what are the patterns you're noticing about them, either on what they're doing or what they're thinking about this, allowing them to navigate the, a really strange situation that we're all in.



And it might be just slightly better than everybody else, but it's enough to be amplified. The impact the ripple effect is having.

Paul: I think it's this, it's an interesting article. It just, I think it's a McKinsey quarterly, this latest edition, but it's on the, the power of personal purpose right now. And I think that's been a lot said about organizational purpose and, even team purpose and, it was a nice sort of, look into, and it's something that I know you and I have believed in a long time, which is, leaders need to leaders who are really clear about why they're showing up and, it's a borrow, language of, our.

our friend, Bob Anderson, how do they make their life, their message, And I know what my message is. Yeah. And so in a moment where there are no right choices where everything feels like some version of less bad, what do I lean into? Yeah. and. in a place where the playbook has gone, I think for many of these organizations, certainly with COVID, but I also think with technology I'm and I just was reading an article about the, I was the head of Warner, Media, being unceremoniously dismissed and this collapse of old Hollywood and the next Netflix, of the entertainment industry, which not everyone is positive about, but, That will continue to happen and it'll continue to happen at an accelerated basis. And so if that's the case, I feel like that sense of personal purpose, that inner anchor, that. Inner narrative, sometimes about this idea of narrative identity, what's the story I'm living, who I, who and who am I in that bigger story of what's unfolding.

And I think when you work leaders around that, and the leaders have noticed that have done actually. In some ways thrived and really stood out is, people are just super clear what they're about, when everything seemed, whenever the lights go out, it's like, there are these sort of beacons of right.

we'll go that way. Yeah. And, yeah. And so then they come in. All right. Levels, all stripes. it's, there's no demographic or seniority that I point to, but it's, when the tide goes out, who's, you can see who's not wearing pants aspect. And I think when difficult times come in, you can see the leaders who actually have done their work.

Pod: yeah. Yeah. It's interesting. You say that because I've noticed the leaders. Yeah, as you said, have a strong sense of purpose for themselves and for the organization that they're leading. And I'll say not obviously, but often they are very linked. They then tend to be able to lean into relationships far more often.

And in fact, they had the increased, the frequency of relationships and team meetings during these kinds of pandemic moments. And they tend to like you mentioned reactive and creative language. When we talk about leadership circle, they tend to be able to lean a whole lot more into the vision and the possibility.



And therefore lead from those kinds of, creative competencies and then the ability to think across the system. And I agree with you, they, it stems from, they are clear about all the realization needs to do, and they're very clear on their role in that. And then it gives a lot of confidence to everybody else.

So the fact that if anything, I think confidence becomes contagious.

Paul: Yeah. Yeah. But, and then what you mentioned, I think is worth just highlighting, which is this, I would argue even absent sort of the disruptive moments, right now this idea of, relationships. in the, in, again, coming back to the leadership circle model, this idea of relating as being your point of leverage, bill, our friend and colleague, bill Adams will often say, who's in the room when you're not, how do you scale you?

these sort of, maybe those are in a way on escapable questions in themselves. But, the reality, which is all of the intellect, all of the capability, all of the ability to make things happen, set against the challenges moving forward, will overwhelm. even the most perfect leader, And so the ability for leaders to bring others into their story, to use that sort of power of connection of relationship of helping people see themselves in the bigger narrative of, doing the David Troy, move of holding a possibility for people long enough for them to believe it themselves.

I think those are the kinds of leaders who. are going to really thrive and come out of this period as being the ones that organizations lean into most. no one in the room versus being the one who makes the room smarter is going to be really, differentiated. Yeah. we need smarter rooms, not smarter.

Yeah, smart people got us here. So that's,

Pod: coming to the end. I've got two final questions for you. And they're the same two. I ask everybody in this whole series. First one is given all of the wisdom you've now accumulated. And I'm assuming there's lots of wisdom. In fact, I know there's lots of wisdom given all the wisdom you accumulated, what would you now it's held a 35 year old version of yourself.

Paul: I think the first thing I'd say is, it's going to be okay. it's, I almost wish every 25 30, like it's going to be OK. most of what you're worried about right now has absolutely no bearing on where your life is headed. figure out who you are, resist the temptation to be who you think you're supposed to be, or who people tell you need to be.

and if you can find a way to have what you do be the only thing you could do, you're going to have a great. A great run, and, be good to your friends, love your family. And, I wouldn't say the rest will take care of itself, but the rest will just happen. Yeah.

So you're going to be okay. I could have used that. So I'll have my 80 year old self tell me. 50, almost 52. I'll apply that to retrospectively

Pod: brilliant. And the last question, and I know that Marcella and your wife, and I share a huge interest in going to live gigs. And we have a share that what he said, but what is your favorite band or indeed your favorite song?

Paul: Oh, gosh. Yeah. yeah, she'd definitely give you a much more updated, answer, to that. she's more in tune with what's going on. but it's such a, you had sent that email and I was thinking about it and I re. So it's an album, it was, it came out the summer. I turned 16 and it was, Bruce Springsteen's born in the USA.

huh. And whether it was born in the USA or I'm on fire or. The whole of side B aging myself was an actually it was a record. it, and it was, like I had known Bruce before, but there was something about that album hitting. the summer I turned 16 and I actually have my middle son turns 16 this summer.

And so I was thinking about, just, it it's this moment in time when, whenever I see that sort of, Bruce's rear end with the baseball hat and that iconic album, I just, I can place myself. I know the beach, I know the. I think growing up in new England, which is, it's not New Jersey, but we weren't a world away.

there was so much of what he spoke to. I think born in the USA was the first time I'd actually really paid attention to the, the lyrics of, disillusionment and, in a way, a lot of. it's played as some patriotic battle a ballad, but when you actually listened to the lyrics yeah.

it's also partly an indictment of choices that have been made and sort of the work class. and I've always loved, I was the first live concert I ever saw was Bruce Springsteen. And, I know you're. So big on storytelling, but I always think, when you go to a bruce Springteen concert, it's 60% stories, then 40% music, it's just his, whether he talks about, getting his draft notice or his argumnts with his dad, or, and then it'll just seamlessly flow into a song.

I just, I find his, that ability to to tell a story, and to create a narrative, part of what I also love about him is, and he says this in his, Bruce Springsteen on Broadway, the Netflix show, which if you have access to it, as I highly recommend that, even if you're not a Bruce Springsteen fan, it's phenomenal theater, but this idea of someone who, never had a blue collar job, never worked nine to five.

Never made a living with his hands and he became the official spokesperson

Pod: for the whole world. And

Paul: as he says in the Broadway show, I'm not good with this idea of how you construct an identity, and that he. Channeled his father and his town and, forever more around the world.

When you say Asbury park, for most of us, a very specific person comes to mind. So yeah, Bruce born in the USA.



Pod: Okay. My first major outdoor concerts of my life was Bruce Springsteen. The year after the album came out, it's slaying castle in Ireland, there was 70,000 people and it was his first.

big outdoor

Pod: concert. I was extraordinary. And my 14 year old son has just fallen in love with Springsteen on Broadway and every time he and I in the car together, that's all he wants to hear. And just to hear the stories behind the songs. So living legend is a, is Springsteen.

Paul: we talk a little bit about, what is it to be self aware?

And it's part of why I love. that, is Broadway a one man show, is it is a masterclass in taking memory and making meaning. Yeah. And being able to somehow weave that together into, an evolved identity and, Yeah, just, it's just speaks to so much of what we would all hope we're well to do in a well lived life.

And, I also love the fact that I think is, I think his oldest son is firemen and, someone else's a musician. So there was this, disability to escape the trap of, are you a ghost or an ancestor? I suspect he's, he's an ancestor. And as children, not a haunting ghost of, can you be a success?

Yeah,

Pod: Paul, it's been a, it's been a pleasure having you on the show today, and it's been a pleasure working with you for the years that we have. And I know for a fact that there's hundreds of leaders who think about by leadership pre Paul Bern and my leadership post Paul Bern, and in terms of the impact you've had on them.

And, I suspect today's show will give listeners who don't know who you are, insights into the golden nuggets that you just bring to the table every time we have a conversation. Thank you, sir.

Paul: Thank you. Thank you.