

E001 – Getting to where the growth happens

Podcast Guests 0:00

Leadership's incredibly lonely. [THEME MUSIC] When we're talking continuous improvement, most of it is failure. In a leadership sense, making sure that your beliefs and values and so on have alignment into what you're running out in the business. A strat plan, as you said before, is a living, breathing document. It's not something you look at once a year. [THEME MUSIC]

Introduction 0:17

Hello, and welcome to the traits of effective leaders podcast, brought to you by SG Partners. Each episode allows you to hear from real leaders of real businesses, with the aim of assisting you to become even more effective at what you do. Whether you're already a leader, CEO, business owner, manager or an entrepreneur. This exploration of leadership effectiveness covers a range of challenges you may already be experiencing yourself. Now, let's hear from our host, international speaker, Master NLP practitioner, and owner of SG partners Michael Lang. Wherever you get your podcasts.

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Michael Lang 0:54

Hello, and welcome to Traits of Effective Leaders podcast. I'm your host, Michael Lang, owner of **SG Partners**. Welcome to an amazing guest. One of the reasons I look for interesting people is they have a certain dynamic about them. So throughout this podcast series, we're going to have several leaders that have led a company and made some mistakes and learned from it and so forth. But today we've got an even another dimension, we've got a guest that not only is a leader in our own business, but she's been leading in assisting other leaders of up to 250 plus companies. And she's already written a book about it as well. So today we're going to discuss many things around leadership not only by herself, but what she's discovered with other leaders in the companies she's worked with.

And then we're going to just probably just go off on a tangent, talk about all fascinating things to both of us. So strap in, and let's kick this off. So my special guest today is Soozey Johnstone, and I met her probably in 2015, where she was helping a group of business leaders grow their businesses by understanding some of the challenges they're having and how they're moving forward. So Soozey is one of Australia's most highly regarded executive advisors, that's something live up to, and the brains behind dramatic turnarounds in the performance of hundreds of different businesses, she leads a small team of talented professionals just like herself. And she's primarily around releasing the gal of productivity in other people's businesses.

She's direct, you'll pick that one up, she's empathetic. And she's very certain about her capabilities, which I love. She doesn't offer transient quick fixes. So she's in there for the long haul. And as I said, She's worked with many companies like NAB, Hella Metricon, Accenture, QBE, I mean, just great logos you might say. And so as a founding director of her company, **Method 9**, she's also an author of the book, **I Am The Problem**, which we'll go into as well. And she's also a co founder of tech diversity. So we've got someone here that's got a great diversity in her understanding about leadership, and also applying those thoughts, those mindsets and those skills to helping other leaders be more effective. So let's get into it. Soozey Johnstone, welcome.

Soozey Johnstone 3:25

Thanks. It's great to be here.

Michael Lang 3:27

And I really appreciate your time and energy here as well.

Soozey Johnstone 3:30

Oh thanks Michael.

Michael Lang 3:31

I mean, I just picked up Soozey in the car, and we were already going on, I said, Hey, we should be recording this, right? It's just, it's just amazing when you get a like minded person that you can just bounce all these ideas. So let's kick off and talk about culture. So my question to you is in your company, and also in other companies, what do you see as the main drivers to create, recreate, or embed culture?

Soozey Johnstone 3:57

The main drivers around culture, there are so many, the interesting thing about culture is that you just pull a group of people together, and you have a culture. And I think in a lot of businesses, especially when you're first starting a business and scaling a business, it's so busy, and it's easy for culture just to happen. And sometimes we're lucky with culture, and sometimes we're not. And culture has a lot to do with the leaders of the business, the leadership team and their intention and how it is they choose to turn up in the workplace.

And so if we start to get intentional about culture, then what is it that we're getting intentional about and how do we create a culture that's in line with our values, which enables the business to scale in a way that we started it and that's really difficult as well. So I think the most important thing is clarity. So clarity around who it is we are, what it is we're working towards what's important, the values, and the behaviours that bring those values to life.

Michael Lang 5:09

In your work with leaders, do you think they think culture is important?

Soozey Johnstone 5:14

I think they struggle with what culture is, very difficult to describe, you know, you can walk into an organisation, and you can sit in reception, and you've been there, and you feel the energy. And even now, I'm going a bit woowoo aren't I, but you can feel from the moment that you communicate with people within that organisation what that company is about. So the hotel you've just picked me up from is a great example of that, that all the little bits of communication that I've had with all of the staff, since my arrival, creates a culture, which creates a feeling in me, and, you know, it makes you think about whether or not you want to be part of that part of that as a customer or stakeholder an employee. And so if you talk about culture, and you then have a conversation about the sort of culture we want to create, then what does that mean? And I think it's certainly starts with our values. You know, what, what is it as an organisation that's really important to us what our values now this is interesting too Michael.

Michael Lang 6:33

Values I mean, the challenge I have with companies, they come up with all the beautiful words, there on the wall, right? And I say, how would you know, someone is living their value? And they will come in on going really, you haven't even explored that you think just by talking about a value that that's culture?

Soozey Johnstone 6:49

Yeah.

Michael Lang 6:50

Would it be even more beneficial if we didn't talk about culture, but we talked about tribes? Because that's something people can get their heads around? Right? I'm a chief of a tribe. So what do we want our tribe to do consistently?

Soozey Johnstone 7:02

Yeah. Yeah. And that, and then we're back at, you know, clarity. Yes. So as I said earlier, you know, this whole concept of leadership, it is the ability to get a variety of different things achieved. It's about bringing other people along on the journey. And it's about the ability to influence, to motivate and to inspire people. And how do we do that? Well, we've got to start with being really clear about what it is we're working towards. So you go away, you do a strategy off site. And I remember, when I was in my 20s, I was working for an amazing organisation and the leadership team, were going away on an off site. And I thought, wow, I would love to be part of that. I've got so many ideas. And they actually sent an email out to the staff, if you've got any ideas, put them in writing. And we're going to take them to the off site. And we're going to come back, and we're going to have a strategy that we'll be working towards over the next three years. And I spent a whole weekend I was writing, I was really excited. I saw the potential and the opportunity. And Michael, I never heard back on that ever.

Michael Lang 8:13

So for that fleeting moment. You thought they cared about you and your input.

Soozey Johnstone 8:18

Yeah, I did. And you know, there is what I perceived as being a value, which was, wow, they're giving the staff, a voice, an opportunity to have a say in what we're working towards. And I worked hard on it, and I got it right down to two pages and sent it out. But unfortunately, I lost my hutzpah right there and then. And so if you're going to be intentional about these things, then creating those vehicles for people can be so powerful. But you know, that's learning from 25 years ago. And I I look at that now. And I think there must be lots of young Soozey's in a variety of different organisations, with that kind of motivation, that do want to be part of something, that want to have a voice and they don't have a leadership role. But they're really passionate about the business.

Michael Lang 9:13

They want to be part of the tribe.

Soozey Johnstone 9:14

Yeah.

Michael Lang 9:14

So why do leaders struggle so much with culture?

Soozey Johnstone 9:17

I think the first thing is they're really caught in the day to day busyness. So I'm the leader. I am the fixer. I'm the problem solver. I'm the firefighter. People come to me and I fix problems. That's the first thing. Secondly, it's ego as well. You've got to protect your ego a lot of the time. And I think that's very difficult for a lot of leaders. And the other thing is getting back to the clarity issue if we're not really clear and intentional about things. And I think a lot of leaders are in the unknown. A lot of the time leadership's incredibly lonely. If you think that the first chapter of my book, it's, it's all about self awareness.

Michael Lang 10:04

Yes.

Soozey Johnstone 10:05

But how can a leader be self aware if they're not getting feedback? So it's a very lonely place. So you've got a leader that's protecting themselves, they're perceived as being the problem solver, and they're lonely. And when they ask for feedback, it's very difficult to get constructive feedback. And I think that's why they find culture really difficult. Because there is a gap between what it is the leadership team perceive is going on. And what really happens in the workplace every day, there's a gap. So how then do we create a culture? You've got to be in it. A lot of the time, so stepping away from the desk actually doing a walk around. And it's difficult with national and international businesses, you know, how is it that you create that presence? But all of that is part of culture. And leadership is not just within the leadership team. You know, it's creating the tribe, custodians across the business, finding those young 20 year old Soozey's and helping them to be culture custodians. And how do you do that? Well, you make them feel part of the strategy, the culture, the communication, conversation, what ideas do they have? You know, make them part of it. It doesn't have to be so structured.

Michael Lang 11:25

So there's, there's good and there's bad ego, right? So while I'm listening to you, you hear many excuses. I don't have time, I'm the problem fixer and I say yeah, but first of all, you got to want to. You've got to want to care about others.

Soozey Johnstone 11:39

Yeah.

Michael Lang 11:40

So it's not an I thing, it's a we thing now. So a lot of leaders I find haven't gone through that process. Yes, I might be the problem fixer, but that's still an I. Where's the leverage? They don't think about how to leverage and therefore go from the I to the we? So the first step is, do you care enough about others? And if you did, that would help you take the first step of discovery. Right? Do that walk around, as opposed to just come into your office in the morning and you stay in the office?

Soozey Johnstone 12:12

It's difficult, because there's eight working hours in the day. So if we're going to get intentional about it, we actually need to take a company wide approach to how it is we choose to turn up at work. So it's not just the leadership team. It's everyone. We're all part of it. So you mentioned the values up on the wall. I was with an HR practitioner asking about the values the other day, and she didn't know what the values were. And I said, well, you know that they're up there. She went oh, yeah, that's right. Well, I've only been with the company for six months. But the thing is, that needs to be part of the induction, the transition, the integration. It's the storytelling.

Michael Lang 12:57

Correct it's the constant storytelling. I mean, just because you have the induction and the onboarding, and there's our values, you're done. Dusted. Yeah, it's part of the leadership's role is never stop telling the story. Never stop giving examples, and never stop embedding. Right? Because, yeah. Wouldn't it be amazing if the tribe lived and breathed those values? Day in day out? Yeah. And they would articulate to someone at a barbecue to say, hey, you should come work for us. Because this is what we do. Right. Cool. So we could go on for a long time about culture and values....

Soozey Johnstone 13:28

And it's nebulous, it's really difficult. And you know, the value is part of it, it's paramount. And yet, what are our values? We only really clearly understand what our values are when we have a values conflict.

Michael Lang 13:43

Correct.

Soozey Johnstone 13:43

Right.

Michael Lang 13:44

So So I say to a lot of companies like you got these values. So what's the above the line behaviour and below the line behaviour for that value?

Soozey Johnstone 13:52

Yeah.

Michael Lang 13:52

They look at me, I said, seriously, how'd you know that I was living breathing the value? How would you know that I wasn't? Capture that and then go articulate that.

Soozey Johnstone 14:02

Yes.

Michael Lang 14:02

And then coach, mentor, walk the floor, never stop telling the story about it. And what would your organisation be like is if everyone called out below the line behaviour, and everyone's celebrated above the line behaviour? Yeah. Wouldn't it be amazing?

Soozey Johnstone 14:19

Yes, skipping through the jaunts, and it'd be fantastic.

Michael Lang 14:21

Life would be easier right?

Soozey Johnstone 14:23

Of course, it would. And I think my, the thing that drives me every day, and the reason that I wrote my book, is things have to change. You know, we can't be just focused on revenue and profitability, that has to be the side benefit for creating really great working environments. I mean, that's what it is, I mean, for our children and our grandchildren in the generations to come. Work shouldn't just be the place we go to have a job to earn the money to buy more stuff. And I think it is for a lot of people.

Michael Lang 15:02

Yeah, I hear a lot of you. And we're seeing examples in Australia where some industries are being caught out. And we still have. So maybe there is a change coming.

Soozey Johnstone 15:13

I feel there is, I am eternally optimistic.

Michael Lang 15:17

Now you work with a lot of founders, right?

Soozey Johnstone 15:19

Yeah.

Michael Lang 15:20

So when we talk about culture, I mean, as we're talking in the car, they have an idea to solve a problem. And so they create the solution. And then it's so focused on delivering that solution, and then they start to grow, and they need to employ people. In your experience, when does this idea of culture sort of pop up in their journey?

Soozey Johnstone 15:39

When I'm working with founders, I like to talk about culture, from the get go, you know, what sort of company are we? What's great about working with founders, they do have a long term view. And when a company begins, and you're working with the founder, from the outset, they can often see the difference that the company is going to make in the world long term.

Michael Lang 16:09

So they're very purpose driven then?

Soozey Johnstone 16:11

Very purpose driven at that time, and really engaged in a very conscious way in all the activity that they undertake. So there are a lot of people that are really inspired by that. And they want to work with leaders like that. And the learning in those environments are huge. So culture often happens because of that kind of leadership when a company begins. And it's really exciting. And I love working with those kinds of businesses, especially when they're scaling globally. And they're looking at opportunities to land in different parts of the world, and how they're going to do it. So there's a lot of talk at that time, not just about what it is we have to do today, but it's what it is we have to execute right here right now, in-line with that long term vision.

And I think in a lot of corporates, that gets lost over time, because, well, for two reasons. I mean, firstly, it's the size of the company, but also the changes that go on, within leadership teams. You know, different leaders come in, and they have a different kind of influence on the team, which has a different kind of influence on the culture. You know, the moment you bring a new member into any team, you have a different culture, you've got diversity of thinking. And I mean, the company that I'm working with this week, they have a new member of the leadership team that has joined. And immediately I mean, that person has a very different behavioural style, a different mindset, a different way of thinking. And the moment you bring a different way of thinking into the team, you are creating such wonderful opportunities.

And I work with a lot of, I hate to say male, pale, stale, men who don't get along particularly well, I get pulled in to a lot of conversations where a company is scaling. And the leadership team no longer get along, or they've brought in a new director that has a different view. And there's a power play. And I think just spend a lot of time saying, hello. Have you noticed anything about the other people around the room? Just you know, just have a look.

Obviously, the leadership team last week, I was working with the board and the CEO and the whole team. And I said, um, what is it about this team that you notice you've got in common? So there was a lot of things shared? And eventually I had to call it and I said, Well, you're all men, you're all middle aged. So you've got the board and the leadership team where's the diversity in this? And one of them said, Oh, my God, why don't we ring Julia? She'd be great for the board. Do you remember Julia? I said, Well, that's actually not creating the kind of diversity I'm thinking about.

Michael Lang 19:07

They went straight there.

Soozey Johnstone 19:09

And I think that's one of the biggest challenges that we have. Is that like, attracts like, we tend to choose to work with people we've worked with before when it comes to new...

Michael Lang 19:20

It's easier right?

Soozey Johnstone 19:20

Of course, it's easier! And you know, it's much easier to do that than to get a headhunter and to go out there and then have somebody independent interview people. Yeah, so it's a tricky place. But I think often when we're all eating the same dog food, and it seems to taste pretty, okay. And it's comfortable, that we think things are going along nicely. And I would argue that the moment we're comfortable, then that's the time that we've got to really reassess.

Michael Lang 19:54

Yeah I totally agree.

Soozey Johnstone 19:56

That was a long answer to your question.

Michael Lang 19:57

That was a great conversation. Thank you.

Soozey, strategy, what are the key activities from your experience needed to consistently apply to ensure people are aligned to strategy? Aligned?

Soozey Johnstone 20:14

Aligned – the key word. I talked about this a lot. I've got a whole chapter that I talk about strategy, I think, clarity around what it is we're working towards is really important. And then once you've got that clarity, so getting back to what we were saying earlier about the, the off site, the think tank, and the strategy, you know, the strategy document, we make a big deal about strategy. But really, what is it?

Michael Lang 20:40

Yeah, it's not, it's not a set and forget, it should be organic, right?

Soozey Johnstone 20:43

It should be part of what it is we're doing every day. And I think, the most inspirational leaders that I have the luxury of working with are really clear about the best use of our time right here right now in line with what it is we're working towards. So they communicate it over and over again. And if you were observing from outside of the business, you might think, Wow, they do that a lot. They repeat the values a lot.

They, they talk about what we're working towards a lot, anytime they can bring teams together, they do it. And in our, in the advertising sector, there is a name for that they call it multi sensory learning and spaced repetition. Right. So if you apply the concept of multi sensory learning, and that is sharing the same message over and over and over again, through a variety of different mediums, so yes, the values are on the wall. But also the values are part of our conversation.

Michael Lang 21:48

Yes

Soozey Johnstone 21:48

We talk about our values, when we're celebrating the success, we talk about our values, when we're engaging with new stakeholders and clients. There's written communication. So a reminder, every time there's something in writing. So there's so many different mediums that we can use to communicate the same message to a variety of different audiences and do it over and over again. So that's the multi sensory learning part. And then there's the spaced repetition. So it's just doing it over and over and over again. And the multisensory as the company scales and grows, you've got different people joining the organisation, you've got new teams, you've got restructuring, you've got so many different vehicles to communicate the same message.

So I don't think you can do it enough. And I often say to people, you actually have to over communicate, right? So whatever you think you're doing, currently, and you think you're doing it really well, and you think you're doing it a lot. Well, now, up the ante, double it. And really, really, yeah, because I'm going back to the advertising concept. People need to hear it more than seven times. And after the seventh time, they'll say, Hey, you know, I was thinking about them, I believe in them, right? Yeah. So they get to that stage of, of actually repeating it to other people as well.

So that's when you get the ripple effect. So that offside, the strategy, that big document that used to go, here's our strategy, this is what we're doing. This is what we're working towards, you know, we have to be so flexible. Now, as leaders, the rate of change is exponential. And so what can we control? We can control the way we communicate, and we can over communicate, and we have to Why? Because I think the the majority of people who join any business, they want stability.

Michael Lang 24:00

They want certainty, well we all want certainty, right? And we want variety, and we want all these other things, but there's a vehicle that coming to work gives us an amount of certainty, which translates to some certainty back home.

Soozey Johnstone 24:15

Yeah. Yeah

Michael Lang 24:02

So they've done a strategy document. Is there certain failures in them implementing it? I mean, do they articulate the objectives? And the activities required? Who's responsible?

Soozey Johnstone 24:31

Okay. Yeah, clarity. So then we've got a strategy. And let's assume that we're half right. And what I mean by that is that the people that go away and do the off site, have got it half right. Because the rest of the strategy actually resides in the knowing of everybody else who works within the organisation. There's me and my job and what's in it for me and the impact that what I do every day has. And so you've got to be able to translate the strategy then into something that has meaning for every member of the organisation, regardless of who they are, what they do, how long they've been with the business, what it is they care about the challenges that they have, you've got to be able to translate it into something that's meaningful to them.

And I think the reason people go, Oh, my gosh, they're away doing that off site, again, that strategy meeting... I actually used to think I was part of the problem, you know, because I, I'd be facilitating off sites and have been doing for many, many years, and I would just be there for one or two days with the leadership team might say them now translating it, and I would always wonder, how do they go about translating it into something that's meaningful? Do they really understand the concept of multi sensory and Spaced Repetition? And I learned as well as a facilitator and working with executive teams, that, you know, you've got to be really clear.

So translating it into something that's meaningful, might actually seem really simple. For you and I, but how do you translate into something for somebody who has just graduated from an arts degree at university has been working in the retail sector, and this is their first job in a in a career for one of a better term, and it's probably a dirty word these days, but how do you translate it into something that's meaningful and inspirational for them, and if you can do it for them, then you're doing it for the majority of people, but I think the bulk of the people are often lost on it.

So you'll translate it, and the next level down will say, Great, okay, now we've worked out what it is we want to do, and they'll communicate back and they'll be some banter there. But eventually, there's a ripple that gets lost. And so I could walk into the building next door, and ask any person on that floor. Tell me about the top three areas in which your role makes a difference to strategy. And I will get an answer that is not clear, not measurable, not tangible. And Michael is that they're very issue to deal with.

And getting back to 50%. Right, you've got it half, right, you have to start the conversation then with everybody else in the business. So there needs to be a programme where the strategy is shared, top down, but there needs to be the vulnerability of us not having all of the answers the fact that our industry is going through massive change, the fact that people don't have the answers at an executive level, at a founder level, at a director level, at a board level, we don't know. Being courageous enough to say, your customers of our product, you know, the staff will be using the product, the staff will be part of the services of that product. And you know, they will understand much more about the business than you do as a leader within the business. So use that, that's where the magic happens. That's where profitability resides.

Michael Lang 28:34

Yeah. So it's interesting, you use two words there, programme and product. If they thought about it as a programme or a product, then they might think about well how do I sell the product internally? Do people buy it? Or what do I need to do to make sure this programme is truly effective? And they might then think differently about embedding the strategy?

Soozey Johnstone 28:55

Yeah, the communication strategy is so important.

Michael Lang 28:59

And the question I would have is even after that strategy session, Did everyone in that strategy session walk away with living and breathing it and taking ownership of it? Or were they going to wind up somewhere else? Because it wasn't?

Soozey Johnstone 29:14

Yeah. Did they really understand it

Michael Lang 29:16

Was there enough conflict? And if people feel safe to share a conflicting perspective, so at the end of that strategy session, the leader knew that everyone was locked in.

Soozey Johnstone 29:28

Yeah, yeah. And that's where I spend a lot of my time. You know, picking up on feelings, seeing, thinking and having to call it.

Michael Lang 29:39

Yes.

Soozey Johnstone 29:40

So, you know, you mentioned earlier that I'm direct. I have worked on being direct for so long. It's not something that ever came naturally to me. And it's interesting that a lot of people do say that I'm direct, I have developed a muscle to be able to call it when I see it. When I feel it, if I notice that a member of the team is slightly disengaged in where it is that we're going to be able to call it. Know full well that I only have a role for one or two days, and I might not ever be back here. And if I don't say it now, I don't call it now that I'm, I'm not serving that team in the best way possible.

If it's hard for me, as a an external facilitator and working with that team, How hard would it be for a member of the team, calling it with their CEO and it is difficult. So I always say my role as playing the devil's advocate, asking the provocative questions to make sure, absolutely sure that everybody walks away with that innate belief. Yeah, this is what we're working towards. This is why it's important. This is why it's a value to me. Because if they can't translate it in that way, then the moment they go back to their own teams, within their working environments, it's lost.

Voice Over 31:14

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Michael Lang 31:29

You pick on a great point, because I say to leaders, I'm a fan of Genghis Khan, and one of the things that I learned about Genghis Khan, even with his family, when he gave them an order, he asked them to repeat the order. So just to have that understanding that people understood you. Right?

Soozey Johnstone 31:47

Yeah.

Michael Lang 31:48

So wouldn't it be great at the strategy session? At the end of the strategy, everyone stood up and actually articulated the strategy? Knowing that yes, we're on the same page?

Soozey Johnstone 31:55

Yes. Yes.

Michael Lang 31:57

There's a great take out there. Cool.

Soozey Johnstone 31:58

Absolutely Important.

Michael Lang 32:00

Soozey, let's talk about your book, right. I Am The Problem. I love the title, right? Because it's in your face.

Soozey Johnstone 32:06

Yeah, yeah.

Michael Lang 32:07

And I know, you send the book out to prospective clients. So if they're gonna engage, then they know what they're getting. So, if we're talking about three core leadership traits, the first chapter is about self awareness. Was that a natural thing to start the book with?

Soozey Johnstone 32:23

Well, funnily enough, when I wrote the book, actually, there's a story behind why I wrote the book. Because I would walk away from leadership teams having, you know, work together and think, oh, my goodness, you know, now that we've gone through this day together, things seem so simple, right? So how could I create that simplicity, and then write a book about it. So that was the whole premise behind the book, to be able to give it to anybody. And to say, there's some practical tips in there, you can implement this immediately. And I'm giving away everything.

I'm giving away 25 years of working with leadership teams, and so many different businesses and industries. And the way I go about improving their effectiveness, their communication, their understanding of what it is they're working towards, it's all there. So I thought, Well, okay, I can give that to future teams that we're going to be working with and say, This is what we're going to be doing together. To help them to understand that it's, it's a bit of a journey that we're going to be on together.

And when I first wrote the book, the self awareness chapter was not the first chapter. And it wasn't until, I don't know, there was 96,000 words in the first, the first book and I, I then had to sort of juggle it around and go through the editing process. And I got one of my clients to read the book. And as a result of that, they said, look Soozey the biggest learning that we have had as a leadership team, is the importance of our mindset, and the impact that our mindset has on our perception of reality and how that forms the company.

Michael Lang 34:06

Go figure.

Soozey Johnstone 34:07

So hello. And I said, Wow, that's what I do . That's actually what we do with Method 9. That's the difference that we make. So that has to be the first chapter, that is self awareness. And self awareness came first. But you said that what other things are really important, you know, once you've got the self awareness, then it's a choice about how it is I want to turn up every day at work. And so with the self awareness comes this conscious intention, right? And then it's communication. So they're the three core elements.

Michael Lang 34:52

So why is it so hard then for leaders to be great leaders?

Soozey Johnstone 34:58

Well, not all leaders have got self awareness. You know, you think about somebody that starts a business. They're technically brilliant. They've recognised that there's a gap in the market, they've recognised that there's a problem that has to be solved. And they have the ability to do it, they've got an idea. So they're brilliant technicians. And then they surround themselves with other brilliant technicians, usually people they have worked with before. And then it takes off and it starts to grow. Well, they haven't been investing in themselves and their self awareness, they're certainly not doing 360 degree feedback, or they're not running workshops and off site. They are working out how it is they're going to scale the business.

So there is not a lot of conversation about being intentional about culture, communication, anything like that, in those early days, until they get first round of funding, and they've got investors and investors say, you know, you've got to really work on that stuff. And then you compare that to big corporates, where you've got natural attrition, and you know, you've got turnover, and people that stay for a fixed period of time, things are changing all of the time. So how do we know how much self awareness a person has? Well, it's when things go wrong, that we recognise it. And then you know, someone will say, we need to get somebody in, we need to have a team off site, we need to invest in the professional development of our people. But even then, it doesn't create self awareness.

Michael Lang 36:38

Do you think? I mean, we're talking about emotional intelligence here, right?

Soozey Johnstone 36:41

Yeah.

Michael Lang 36:42

Do you think self awareness is linked to the ability in art form of listening?

Soozey Johnstone 36:50

Yes. Yes, I do. But it's not listening. Like we're listening to each other now.

Michael Lang 36:58

Yeah.

Soozey Johnstone 36:59

It's also a feeling

Michael Lang 37:00

Yeah. Listening to everything.

Soozey Johnstone 37:02

Yeah.

Michael Lang 37:02

It's a multi dimension.

Soozey Johnstone 37:03

Yeah.

Michael Lang 37:04

So a leader calls you up and says, I need some help with the executive team, is one of your core components of whether you will engage with the leader and the core and the team is there is some self awareness by the leader?

Soozey Johnstone 37:20

This is a tricky question. Will I share a quick story?

Michael Lang 37:23

Yeah, go for it. Yes, please.

Soozey Johnstone 37:25

I had a phone call from a company director. And the things he said over the phone about his fellow directors was very interesting to me, there's a lot of colourful language. And your company's been recommended. And I want you to come in and fix the team. And I love, Michael, I love a challenge. I love a challenge. And you know, this is a very This is a recent story.

Michael Lang 37:52

But in the back of your mind you got a red flag, right?

Soozey Johnstone 37:54

Of course I do. But I'm incredibly curious, like, wow, how does it come to that? And he said, Well, how are you going to approach this? I said, Well, we would need to interview every member of the executive team. And there were a couple of directors in there, the CEO in there. And Oh I don't want to do that I just want to have a workshop just get you in? I said No, really, we need to do that.

Because we have to gather the evidence in all the different areas of the team before we help you to make some decisions about how to fix the team. We have to get their different perspectives. And there are things and this is what's really interesting. There are things that people will share with an external consultant that they have never shared with anyone.

Michael Lang 38:45

Yeah, I know.

Soozey Johnstone 38:47

And you get that one on one. So then it's our job to go into those environments, and ask some really, what you might think are very naive questions, in order to be able to start to help these teams to have the much deeper conversation. Well, ironically, it turned out that it wasn't the team that needed fixing.

Michael Lang 39:10

No!

Soozey Johnstone 39:12

Yeah! And there was one individual, the person that called me that was the person that didn't have the self awareness didn't have that level of intelligence around the impact that their behaviour was having on a very, it's an international business, and it really made me sad because I felt that we got that phone call far too late.

Michael Lang 39:42

Right.

Soozey Johnstone 39:43

If only someone else in that team had have made that call. This has been going on for seven years.

Michael Lang 39:49

Oh, wow. So if only someone cared enough to think about helping this person.

Soozey Johnstone 39:55

Yeah. But they instead they were intimidated.

Michael Lang 40:00

Right.

Soozey Johnstone 40:01

And I think that happens a lot. So you're intimidated by somebody in the SLT or in the leadership team. And because you're intimidated, you don't speak out, you don't call behaviours that are inappropriate

Michael Lang 40:16

Isn't it interesting. They're there for seven years, other people, so what does that say about their values and their vehicles, right?

Soozey Johnstone 40:22

And then obviously talking in the car park, like the things that I heard, you know, so they're sharing their issues. And they had given him some feedback on the impact that he was having. They had given him some feedback on slowing down, investing in himself, but he was he was hot all the time, I'd say his anxiety level, like he would have been waking in the night, he was bringing this anger with him. And, Michael, when it gets to that point, how do you communicate. How do you, as a fellow leadership team member choose to turn up? So you've got to step into that. You have to be incredibly vulnerable yourself,

Michael Lang 41:16

Which takes courage right?

Soozey Johnstone 41:17

It takes a lot of courage. And it has to be about them in a way that, that their behaviour impacts you. So all the feedback that you give, needs to be 'me' feedback, not 'you' feedback. The moment you go into,

Michael Lang 41:36

You

Soozey Johnstone 41:36

Yeah, use it when you've got somebody who is operating with that level of angst, and frustration.

Michael Lang 41:45

It feeds it.

Soozey Johnstone 41:46

Yeah. So that's part of the problem, too. So as much as people may have tried, you know, 'you appear to be really angry'. Well, of course, that really calms them down. You know, when you said that, did you see what you did to everybody else, it starts to isolate the team member that actually needs the most help. So I really feel for him because he inevitably has been voted out.

Michael Lang 42:12

Yes. Survivor haha

Soozey Johnstone 42:15

I've been part of that. And this is not unusual. I'm the bad guy, which is great. I mean, I'm more than happy to do that. And to help, help a team to move on. But the thing is, I find it incredibly frustrating that nobody, over the last five years went and got help themselves, to be able to work out how to have the conversation. Because the moment you've talked about yourself, and how it is you feel about turning up to work and have that vulnerable conversation one on one.

If you do that over a period of one and a half or two hours with the person that really needs the help, you will get somewhere you really will, you've got to be so patient, committed, clear. But talking about how it is you feel and what it is you want. And Michael, everybody has the same goal. I look at that team, I look at the team I'm working with, at the moment, very similar problems, but no one's going to be voted out. It's going to be great, thank goodness, because somebody was courageous enough to say, we have a problem.

Michael Lang 43:22

Yes

Soozey Johnstone 43:23

We need to do something about it. And that takes courage. But we all have the same goals. We all want to come to work, to have a voice to feel valued. To feel as though we're making a difference. To be in touch with why we started the business in the first place.

Michael Lang 43:39

We all want to be part of that tribe.

Soozey Johnstone 43:41

We are! We all want to be part of that tribe. It's innate. It's part of our DNA. It's what makes us human. So the moment it becomes you and me, we're dead in the water. Yeah, it's always got to be we. And the 'we' it's there.

Michael Lang 43:55

Care about others – give a shift.

Soozey Johnstone 43:58

Yeah. Yeah.

Michael Lang 43:59

I had this leader, we were doing some leadership work. And I gotta say, the Managing Director cared enough about his people to ask us to get involved because he wasn't involved. He asked us. And when we interviewed, one of the other leaders said, I'm a Dictator. And the way he said it was a badge of honour – I'm going, why me? And it was some cross contextuality in his marriage and so forth. And I thought oh... we did emotional intelligence 360. And everyone said, they didn't want to work with him. And I thought, I don't know if this is gonna work. But to his credit, six months later, he did 180 degree turnaround.

Soozey Johnstone 44:38

Yeah.

Michael Lang 44:38

People said they want to work with him. So there was a trigger point. And that's what it's about, human beings will change if there's a trigger point.

Soozey Johnstone 44:45

Now, what was the trigger point?

Michael Lang 44:47

So it's either an internal trigger point or external trigger point. You know, I kind of think the trigger point would be some things that we shared with him, but maybe the 360. But maybe he was also going on a foreign assignment to another culture. Which would not have got him anywhere. Right? To a culture where being a dictator would not work at all, you would have been isolated. I say in a foreign country, you can't speak the language. There's no way you can act like you've been acting.

Soozey Johnstone 45:16

Yeah.

Michael Lang 45:16

And if you're going to be isolated, it's going to be for a long time. Right? So yeah, so there's probably many trigger points. I've just, kudos to him that he got it. Right. One of the things that we, we set up some projects, we said, right, your team has projects, and they all need everyone else to help them in their project success. But your only project is to run project meetings, and you have to bring the morning tea, and you have to buy it. Demonstrate that you care enough about others to go do that. The only thing you have to do, and you have to be consistent.

Soozey Johnstone 45:48

I think that would have been with that guy, an overarching purpose, as well. You know, if I think back to the team that I'm working with now, there is a, when it all boils down, the CEO, his voice broke, when he said, I want this to be my legacy.

Michael Lang 46:12

Ah, there you go, there's the trigger.

Soozey Johnstone 46:14

And there. So every form of communication beyond that was your legacy. And it was so easy to say, you know, because we, I would crystallised that.

Michael Lang 46:27

That's so primal, isn't it we're talking about a chieftain here

Soozey Johnstone 46:29

Yeah

Michael Lang 46:29

I want this to be my legacy.

Soozey Johnstone 46:31

And when they're little, you know, that voice just breaks up just a little, or where there's a bit of a glimmer in there.

Michael Lang 46:37

So there's some emotion going.

Soozey Johnstone 46:39

When you're within. And so the belief we talked about earlier, there's this overarching belief. And I want to be seen as being the person that helped us to get there, you know, this is my legacy. Then the awareness around caring for the tribe, and being a leader of a tribe or a variety of different tribes, you know, a tribe in every, every country you're working in, it then becomes about everybody else.

And I wonder how fearful people are as leaders. And I was with a lady yesterday, I said, Where are you going to be in five years? And she said, I love the idea of being a CEO. I don't know what that means. It's scary to me. But really, you don't know what it's like being the boss until you're the boss. And you don't know how lonely it is until you are at the top of the organisation. And then what?

Michael Lang 47:39

Yes,

Soozey Johnstone 47:40

Yeah.

Michael Lang 47:40

Well, that's right. I mean, some people can peak too early. So cool. Soozey, we're talking about self awareness, self awareness, as a critical trait also means that you should learn from failures, or as I like to call them lessons learnt, just a softer way. Part of my own struggle in getting into business was, I had this mindset that I'd listened to so much noise out there that leaders said to be successful, you must fail. And I just said to myself, well, I have two rules, primary rules. I must be perfect. And I must not fail. So you can't.

Soozey Johnstone 48:21

Wow.

Michael Lang 48:22

Yeah. So that was a that was thanks to Tony Robbins, right. So in the programme with him, you know, find out your primary rules, then, you know, when I came to understanding those two rules, I went back to when I was 15 years old, in the kitchen with my dad, and my dad says, I don't care what you do in life, you could be a garbage man, just make sure you're the very best. So there's a rule of perfection. Now, parents are parents, they just do what they know.

Soozey Johnstone 48:52

Yeah.

Michael Lang 48:53

But imagine going back if only he said, 'and you're going to fail. And that's okay'. Just that little bit. Because straightaway, I went back to there, it was deep seated. So you cannot seek the journey of perfection unless you do fail and learn. So here, I have two rules, one in opposite directions of the other, which then stopped me going forward. So I had to align them and change my rules.

So once I got that, and then I thought, well, actually, I don't have to fail to succeed. I can learn from other people's failures, and listen to their learnings. And then if I'm self aware enough to see how I can embed those learnings. So Soozey what's some failures or lessons learnt in growing your business or experiencing with other businesses?

Soozey Johnstone 49:44

I've had lots of failed businesses. Actually.

Michael Lang 49:49

Really? Have you? I didn't know that.

Soozey Johnstone 49:52

Yeah, yeah. It's really interesting. I started my first company I think when I was 19...

Michael Lang 50:02

Get out!

Soozey Johnstone 50:02

Yeah, anyway, answering your question, this could take a long time. So I'll just do a quick snapshot. Firstly, I come from a long line of entrepreneurs. So the entrepreneurial spirit is in my blood, you know, my grandmother and grandfather founded a bakery and listed it and bought a number of different bakeries. And they had so many staff working for them when my grandfather died. And my dad had to step in, like go out of school with the horse and cart, doing bread runs, and all that sort of stuff. And he talks about that a lot. And it's great, dad's still working full time, he started his own company 50 years ago, this year, and he's in containers, packaging, anything you can think of, that's made out of steel.

Michael Lang 50:43

Right.

Soozey Johnstone 50:50

And my brother and my sister both work in the company as well. And it's national, and, you know, something to be immensely proud of, as a family. Now, of course, I'm the only family member not involved in the business. And I've gone off doing my own things, but I've done a variety of different things. And with the businesses, I mean, I'll just share the epic failures rather than, because there's been so many, but I think that's what comes, you know, you talk about your father, its role modelling. We don't know how we're role modelling its parents, unless we're really conscious about it. And I often wonder what I'm doing to mess up my girls, you know, I can't help myself as a mother, you know, because I do work pretty hard. And it comes from a place of passion. But you know, what, how is that kind of impact them?

Michael Lang 51:46

Maybe you should ask them?

Soozey Johnstone 51:47

Yeah, well, I will, I will ask them, I probably haven't asked them that directly. I'll get them to listen to this. And then I'll ask them. But it's interesting, because the failures, the epic failures that I have had have been profound learning experiences. And the first one was going into a partnership with my boss.

So I've been working with an organisation for many, many years. And we were out for dinner. And we did the business plan on the serviette in the restaurant, as you do, and I was so excited, because he was somebody who I so admire, and I'd learnt so much from.

And I thought, wow, what it is we've done together, we built a hugely successful business together, you know, growing to 18 million over three years, we just worked and slept. And probably very little of the latter. So to start up something together was really exciting. And then it didn't work. And I think it wasn't about the business not working. It was about aligning our priorities and the values and the things that were really important. I wanted him around a lot. And he didn't have the capacity to be around and in the business a lot. And my communication in hindsight, and I was 30 at the time. My communication was less than average, I would say, you know, I was just head down, bum up.

I wasn't having the conversations that really mattered most and asking questions to get him involved in it. Yeah. Whereas I wasn't having the we, the bigger picture, you know, all the things that you learn through epic failures. Anyway, that was an epic failure, because I had been on this trajectory with a really phenomenal career and really great business, all the things that you really hope for in any person in a working environment. And then to be in this situation where suddenly Well, that's it, it's all over. Now, what? And also having started a family and all of those things, and you know, what does the 'what next' look like? And then going from that epic failure into another epic failure, somebody who said, right, we want to give you 50% of our company and we'll work together This is going to be amazing National Business, and...

Michael Lang 54:36

What colour were your glasses, where they rose coloured?

Soozey Johnstone 54:39

See that's the one thing I would say about epic failure and the learnings through epic failure. The people that have that ability to see it as an investment in their learning and growth, tend to be more resilient and then they I said certainly a muscle that I developed.

But the muscle I didn't develop was getting some better glasses, right? spending the time actually thinking about the long term what it is I wanted to achieve.

So yeah, the second epic failure, it was purely a values conflict around what it is we're working towards where it is we wanted to take the business and it was insurmountable in the end. Then I started Method 9, I actually went in with Method 9 with a 50% partner. And, again, values conflict. And ironically, those three examples, and have I covered the three epic failures? It's Yeah, they're the big ones. Ironically, I am, those three people are three of my closest friends.

Michael Lang 55:53

Oh wow, okay

Soozey Johnstone 55:53

Well, I had dinner with one of them a couple of nights ago, he was in Brisbane as well, like we talk every other week, he's still my mentor. So although just big learning, for me, it's big learning for us. And I think that the reason we're all such good friends is because personally, the learning that I gained through those failures was invaluable to me, I think at the end of my life, I will look back, I mean, first and foremost, family is the big thing. But for me, it is about learning. And I could never have done an MBA and learn what I learned, or masters or...

Michael Lang 56:36

That's not uncommon to hear that.

Soozey Johnstone 56:39

It was powerful. And the theme, through those three epic failures, I think, has made me so risk adverse. When I'm dealing with companies that are going through scale up and growth, or bringing new executive team members into the team, I have these processes that I put in place to help these people to recognise the mistakes. So it's both it's having a firm spine, and a warm heart. And I think through all those years, and those epic failures, I had this warm heart, you know, a very opportunistic,

Michael Lang 57:17

Empathy.

Soozey Johnstone 57:18

Yeah, big empathy. Great, great. Great having that, isn't it? It can get you into a lot of trouble, you know, so my biggest strength became my biggest limitation in my ability to be a leader in my own business. And that's great, because I'm getting to the end of the story. Now, I've managed to put 20 years into a snapshot, but the biggest learning for me through all of that, is that that self awareness around what is my greatest strength? So if my greatest strength is my empathy, and my ability to really connect in and communicate to ask the questions that are going to help teams move along. Well, what's the risk in that? Well, the risk is that I'll get people to open up and to move along, and to talk about what it is they're working towards. But there needs to be that firm spine, that clarity. What are you going to do by when? What do you need from the team? Why is this important? Do you truly believe? I mean, that's a closed question. A very powerful question. And if there's any hesitancy in the answer to that question, then you really have to go back to the blank canvas, start over, rethink reframe. And the consequences of not having those difficult conversations can end up in epic failure, which Michael, is not that bad.

Michael Lang 58:55

Well it's got you to where you are now. Right?

Soozey Johnstone 58:57

Yeah.

Michael Lang 58:57

So let me ask the final question then. So go back to 20 years.

Soozey Johnstone 59:03

25

Michael Lang 59:03

25 years, you meet yourself?

Soozey Johnstone 59:07

Yeah.

Michael Lang 59:07

Right. What advice would you have given yourself back then? That might have made life easier?

Soozey Johnstone 59:17

It's amazing. I spend the majority of my consulting, coaching, one on one time talking about the importance of being really present. So if I was to go back to you know, 25 year old self, I would say, you know, just breathe. Take some time to really think about what it is you are working towards. And I look back and I think Well, I I was in a hurry and that eternal optimism created an environment of being up When I have these businesses that ended up being epic failures, which has been great learning, you know, it has got me here. If I didn't have that learning over the 20 years, then I probably wouldn't be doing what I'm doing now.

Michael Lang 1:00:17

So okay. Soozey now goes back to Soozey 25 years ago, what would have happened if Soozey now said, Hey, Soozey, I don't know, if you're aware of it, but you're great at empathy. You really are great at getting people to open up. And through that process, they're going to have some aha moments, and it's going to change their lives, professionally, and cross contextually. And the only thing you need to learn is, along with empathy is the directness, to hold people accountable. Imagine what life would be like now for you?

Soozey Johnstone 1:00:52

Yeah, well, I wonder what I'd be doing now.

Michael Lang 1:00:55

Yes

Soozey Johnstone 1:00:55

Right. So I think there's a good chance I'd be doing something very different.

Michael Lang 1:01:01

Very different.

Soozey Johnstone 1:01:01

Because those epic failures sent me on a journey to help others to mitigate risk. And really, it did start with my father, because I, I actually remember, my mum and dad being in the office, in our family home, I was in my school uniform. So I was probably 15 or 16. And the door was slightly open. And I could hear voices raised. And so I was inquisitive, and put my ear to the door. And dad was saying, I actually don't know how we're going to be able to pay the school fees, you know, so there was a massive debt in the business, the business that's still going today. But it was such a difficult time. And you know, we're going to have to call the principal, we're going to have to rethink all of this. And it was in that moment, I thought, wow, gee, he's got a tough job. Suddenly, in that moment, I'd always seen him as you know,

Michael Lang 1:02:06

Yes, superhero?

Soozey Johnstone 1:02:07

Absolutely. A little bit scary, actually, you know, I'd hear his car coming home at night. And I think, you know, I wonder what sort of mood he's going to be in. And I write about this in my book, and I get along so well, so well, with my dad, but I think one of the challenges when I look back then was that that moulded me in so many ways that, you know, leadership and owning a business is incredibly hard, incredibly hard.

So what was it about me, for goodness sake, that made me think that I would want to do that. And I think too, because he was a wonderful role model. And without him knowing he imparted that knowledge, he's started sharing a lot more now. And I've got him writing about his history, and we're catching up once a month. And all the stories about the business is so interesting, they're stories that have to be collected and have to be shared. And I love those conversations.

There wasn't a lot of that, then. And it's amazing how I feel all those pieces of my, my childhood puzzle and, and all the work that I've done in this space is now it's a confluence of all that that's coming together through conversations I'm having with my dad. So had I had a firm spine and somebody saying, you know, you need to develop a firm spine.

And if I'd done a lot of work in that space, the person that I, I would have become would have been very, very different. And all of that said, I think we've got to go on our own journey to know the areas in which we need to develop. Because like an MBA, if somebody said, You've got to develop a firm spine, how do we do it?

We actually need to be increasing the size of our comfort zone a little bit every day to develop the firm spine. And that's the one thing I pass on to the girls, is to say, you know, if you can just increase that level of comfort just a little bit every day. That's where the learning happens. That's where the growth happens. And really, at the end of your life, when you're just in a box. That's all you're going to take with you. So yeah, it's important.

Michael Lang 1:04:32

Fantastic. Thankyou, Soozey. So Soozey, I really appreciate you being here. For those who are interested Soozey has written a great book, 'I am the problem'. First chapter self awareness. Go figure. It is a great book, and we'll promote it for you Soozey. I really appreciate your time and effort and being vulnerable and courageous in sharing.

Soozey Johnstone 1:04:52

Oh, thanks for having me. Great to talk. Thanks, Michael.

Michael Lang 1:04:54

I look forward to more. Thank you.

Soozey Johnstone 1:04:56

Thank you.

Voiceover 1:04:59

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