

Ali:

Hi, Jerry.

Jerry:

Hi.

Ali:

Let's talk about adaptive leadership since it's a, it's a common topic at the dinner table. (laughs) And you have a lot of thoughts on it. So you often site a Department of Defense article on adaptive leadership, um, but HBR, uh, has a piece called *Finding the Right Balance and Flexibility in Your Leadership Style*. Um, it, and I'll just, I'll posit this here and it can maybe frame wherever you want to take it, but... In it they write, "Our research conducted with more than 1,000 managers across the globe suggests that what's out of date is the idea that a leader should adopt a fixed leadership style that's agnostic to the specific contexts in which he or she is operating. A single approach to leadership, whether it's traditional or emerging, it not going to meet the myriad of challenges that today's leaders face." Um, and they, of course, also site, like, the last two years, managing through the pandemic, et cetera, et cetera, as, like, an instance as to why this is so true.

Jerry:

You know, I really appreciate this topic because, you're right. All kidding aside, it's, it's something I have lived with now almost 30 years because I actually read that original report back when I was a young, a wee lad, I was a young manager, um, in Information Week magazine. Um, thrust early on in an age, or early age, 25, into a position of having to manage a \$100 million a year budget and, 40, 50 employees, and I was scared as shit. So I was reading everything possible. And I stumbled across this article. I don't remember how I got the article, but I stumbled across this article and I read it, uh, and for the first time I felt, you know, [inaudible 00:03:48] in this position. I felt like I could breathe because I realized that I had locked myself into a position which was, "I need to be a leader like..." fill in the blank.

And, you know, the, the, the challenge with being a leader like blank is that, um, one of the first things you, you end up giving up is who you are as a leader. Right? You start to disconnect from your own leadership style, from your innate style. And, typically we do that out of a sense of incompetence, out of a sense of insecurity. Right? I don't know how to lead so I'm going to model myself after someone. So that's thing one on the, on the why it felt so relieving.

Thing two, I'll, I'll go back to some of the conclusions that I still remember. One is that, um, the Department of Defense studied small group leadership and what they realized was two very important things. That the ideal size of small group leadership, of effective leadership, is about seven people. And, if you think about it, think about all of the CEO clients and manager clients that we have. When does, when do things start to break down? It's when their direct reports start to be eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, fourteen, fifteen, twenty people. Right? And that the only way to actually manage directly twenty people or more is with a fixed notion of what it is to lead and how to lead. When I realized this, the second piece of this is the realization that one should adapt how one leads to every individual.

Now, this is kind of mind blowing, if you think about it, because almost every leadership book tells you these are the five things to do to be a leader. So I want to be very specific about it. There are things that every leader needs to do in every instance, like tell the truth. Shocking, right?

Ali:

Yeah.

Jerry:

Or, like, be clear in your communications, or you know, but the breakthrough in the thinking for me was to spend time thinking about who the individual that I'm reportedly leading, who they really are. And not only do what they need versus what someone else needs, but what do they need in the moment?

So, I'll give you a very specific kind of illustration on this. Some people that we lead need specific directions and clear, concrete steps to know that they're making progress. And some people need autonomy and the ability to fail. And your job as a leader is to actually read the room. Your job is to read the situation. Your job, you know, in a, in a moment of crisis, when a company's going through challenges, one of the things a leader might have to do is clamp down and structure things really hard so that you create a sense of stability.

But the minute things start to be a little bit more relaxed, you might want to open things up. But if you open them up, the person who has a lot of insecurity might get freaked out, so you give them some structure, right? And the other person who has a lot of spontaneity and creativity and enthusiasm, you don't want to kill that, so you give them a little bit more latitude, a little bit more flexibility. Now, that's what I mean when we talk about adaptive leadership. It's like constantly reading the road to figure out who needs what, when, and where. And I'll pause there and acknowledge that that's hard. It's, it's really hard for the individual to do that.

Ali:

As you were talking, I was, I was trying to imagine, or itemize what are all of the required skills. Um, and there's...

Jerry:

A long list.

Ali:

There's a long list because, well, there's no book, right? Because every leader's situation is entirely different.

Jerry:

There you go.

Ali:

It's really relational.

Jerry:

Yes. It's not transactional.

Ali:

Yes.

Jerry:

It's super relational. What else do you notice?

Ali:

That it could be really hard to manage a team of seven or so when one person is a super, I don't know, doesn't like structure, and somebody needs structure.

Jerry:

(laughs)

Ali:

I mean, I can, I can raise my hand in the doesn't need structure category and...

Jerry:

Oh, oh, more, more, more than doesn't need structure. If someone tries to lead you by imposing too much structure, what would be your reaction?

Ali:

I just won't do it.

Jerry:

(laughs) Right?

Ali:

I mean, if I, if I wasn't the owner of a company, it would, I would have a really hard time.

Jerry:

Right.

Ali:

But, some part of my soul would probably be dying.

Jerry:

Mm-hmm.

Ali:

It would be hard. But, to then... It's one thing to manage individuals and get them aligned on your, you know, uh, clear, directional company goals. Uh, and then, how do you bring them all together in the same room? How do you get them working together?

Jerry:

So, that's level two. Let's, let's talk through level one a little bit more.

Ali:

Okay.

Jerry:

Because one of the, one of the other skills, I think, is the kind of listening that really teaches, deep, somatic, soulfully listening. And, you're right in relating this back to a relational style of engagement. It means tuning yourself into what that other person needs and really trying, trying your best to pay attention to that. And I'll cite two different sources of reinforcement for this in my own life. One is the, as you know, the Non-violent Communications training that I went through. And, just to flesh it out, *Non-violent Communications* is a book I highly recommend. It's written by Marshall Rosenberg.

And one of the most effective questions that I learned is to ask, in a sense, about the other person, what need are they trying to meet by whatever action they're doing. So, for example, if we went back to you, you as an example, there's a need you have in resisting being told what to do and resisting structure. That need, understanding that need, is the most important, uh, component of what it would be to be in work relationship with you. Because, if we squelch that, and you said it quite articulately before, if we squelch that need, a little bit of your soul starts to die. And your creativity, and your spontaneity, and your innovation, and your ability to, to expand and be expansive and generative in your thinking. And, at best, you become a rote robot. Right? Compliant but not necessarily thriving.

The other person that comes to mind is, and I often cite her as my therapist, Dr. Sayers. And this is something that got reinforced with me when I was first training to be a coach. And she used to stay to me all the time, almost as my senior coach, "You meet the client where they are." You don't drag someone to where you are. Now, if we adapt that to a leadership situation, and we think about how do we get the team to work together as a team? How do we get a team to work together fluidly, with flow? You have to meet each individual team member where they are, not drag them to where you are. Now, I want to be clear, this doesn't mean not holding people accountable to objectives and goals.

Ali:

Right.

Jerry:

What it really means is understanding the most effective way for that person to meet their goals and objectives. Not I'm going to give you the same set of goals and objectives as somebody else and you

must do it exactly the way somebody else is doing it. That is a prescription for frustration and failure. And, I guess as I, as I, so, so, to me, that's level one.

Jerry:

The second thing, uh, sort of level two, call it. I'll give you another model for me and that's Joe Torre, the former manager of the New York Yankees. And I often site the New York Yankees, not only because I'm an obsessive fan but because the '98 Yankees won more baseball games than almost any team in history. And if you think about the way that team was managed, um, there were a lot of superstars, but there were also a lot of what are known as good utility players, like a guy named Luis Sojo. And Luis Sojo just loved playing baseball. He just loved it. Every time he caught a ball, he'd just smile.

And, the thing that Joe Torre did with a lot of lowered egos on his, part and everybody else's part, was to create a sense of cohesive whole. Leaving room for big ego players like Alex Rodriguez or even Derek Jeter, and small ego players like Luis Sojo. And every one of the players could contribute in their own way. Play their own music. Contribute their own art. And the ball would just flow from player, to player, to player. Right? Jeter would throw the ball to Sojo. Sojo would throw the ball to, to Alex Rodriguez, and they never double-checked to see if the ball was going to be caught. They'd just throw knowing that the ball was going to be caught. And, again, they won more games than almost any team in history.

Jerry:

Right? Now, forget the idealism I have about the Yankees in '98. The more important thing to sort of take away from this is, what we want is that flow among the team. We want everyone to feel like this is an opportunity for me to do the best work of my life. Which means that the leader's job is to create the conditions for them to have their needs met and get out of the way, even when the leader thinks they know there's something better that needs to be done. Some of our colleagues need the ability to fail and some of our colleagues need the ability to never fail. And our job is to be deeply relational, deeply listening, and responsive, adaptive. Lean in. Help here. Help there. Step back. And then it flows.

You remember when we first started building Reboot and you and Dan would mock me continuously? Right? I mean, you still mock me, but you would mock me continuously because I would tell the story about Tom Sawyer. Remember this? And convincing people to paint the fence?

Ali:

Uh-huh.

Jerry:

Right? And getting people to pay him to paint the fence. Right? This was a story from either Tom Sawyer or Huck Finn. And Lao Tzu was just trying to get people to befriend him, and pay him for the benefit of doing it. That's true. That is my goal. But, seriously, the goal is, at the end of the day, for people to feel, as Lao Tzu says, "When the work is done, the people say, 'We did this ourselves.'" So, I know we're pulling on the string of adaptive leadership style but, for me, I like to see it in the broader context of all of this. Because, if we approach it this way, the end result is hard work gets done by many hands. All of the hands feel proud of the work that they've done and everybody gets to go home happy. And, I don't

see... What's the point of building a business if you're not gonna go for that goal? Good work, done well, for the right reasons.