



PROFILES IN LEADERSHIP, COLLABORATION, AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT INTERVIEW SERIES

INTERVIEW WITH LEE BOLMAN AND JOAN GALLOS



LIST OF PARTICIPANTS:

LEE BOLMAN & JOAN GALLOS

Authors of *Engagement: Transforming Difficult Relationships at Work*

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STEVE KRASKE

I'm Steve Kraske, and this is the Overland Resource Group podcast series – “Profiles in Leadership, Collaboration and Employee Engagement.” These are stories about the surprising results organizations achieve by experimenting with alternative approaches to working collaboratively, empowering employees and leading more creatively.

These stories are told by leaders of corporations, government agencies and the unions which represent their workforces as well as leading experts in the field of organizational change.

The series is underwritten by Overland Resource Group, a change leadership consultancy bringing transformative results to organizations for over 30 years.

Today we're visiting with the authors of *Engagement: Transforming Difficult Relationships at Work*, which focuses on the idea of managing difficult people and working effectively with them.

The authors are Lee Bolman. He holds the Marion Bloch/Missouri Chair in Leadership at the Henry Bloch School of Management at the University of Missouri–Kansas City, where he has also served as interim dean. He holds a Ph.D in organizational behavior from Yale University. Lee Bolman consults and lectures worldwide to corporations, public agencies, universities and schools. Prior to assuming his current position, he taught at Carnegie Mellon and then for more than 20 years at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Lee, what a pleasure to have you.

LEE BOLMAN

Thank you, Steve. It's a pleasure to be here.

STEVE KRASKE

Joan Gallos is a professor of Leadership at Wheelock College, where she also served as vice president for academic affairs. She holds master's and doctorate degrees in organizational behavior and professional education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She's also a former director of the Executive MBA program at the Henry Bloch School of Management at the

University of Missouri–Kansas City. Joan, so good to have you, too. Welcome.

JOAN GALLOS

Thank you.

STEVE KRASKE

Lee, it may go without saying, but one of the points you make here is that learning to work effectively with difficult people is a skill set that every manager needs. In some ways, this isn't an optional skill set, is it?

LEE BOLMAN

No, it's not, because it's really hard to find people who've been out in the work world for very long who haven't run into either an impossible boss or a really difficult co-worker or a subordinate who causes them to tear their hair, so the experience of running into a really tough person to deal with is just about universal, and people need to have some ways of dealing with it.

STEVE KRASKE

Joan, you say in here, too, that too often, the advice for dealing with a difficult co-worker focuses on fixing whatever is wrong with them – you know, their personality flaws, obnoxious behavior, character defects, or whatever else it is. But that's not what you advise. Why not?

JOAN GALLOS

Well, I think, Steve, there are a number of issues at play. One, very few managers are skilled counselors, and having the ability to take on workplace psychiatry is a dangerous job. The second piece is if we're really talking about long-term personal character change, we are talking long-term intervention, and that requires the choice and the determination and the hard work of the person who is setting out to change, not someone who is determining they should take that work on.

STEVE KRASKE

But for managers the temptation, Joan, is to want to fix the other person who's causing all these problems, and again, you say that's probably not the place to be.

JOAN GALLOS

Well, it's probably not the place to be because in some cases it may be very clear that you're dealing with a very difficult, really pathological individual. And in that situation, you best stay away. That's not the work for amateurs. What we have the most control over is our own behavior, and all relationships are like a dance. Whoever leads the other will follow. And if we look at the relationship between an individual and someone who is considered difficult, if one of the individuals changes their behavior, there's a very good chance the other will respond. If not, it's an important piece of diagnostic information that you may be in over your head.

STEVE KRASKE

Well, Lee, maybe the question then, based on what Joan just said, is how do you determine who's to lead here in this dance? How do you determine who should take the first step towards making a substantive change?

LEE BOLMAN

Well, I think typically, if I have a problem with someone else, I need to take

the first step. One of the temptations whenever someone feels difficult to me is to say, “I’m OK. You’re not OK.” If I approach you with the message there’s something wrong with you, and we’re going to fix it, that probably isn’t going to work very well. So what I need to do is take an initiative that helps both of us to improve the relationship.

STEVE KRASKE

So you say, Lee, the key here is changing the question from “How do I change the other person?” to “How can I change what I do or understand in hopes of improving our relationship?”

LEE BOLMAN

Right. Because often, when someone feels difficult to me, I almost automatically do things that don’t work, and in fact, if a relationship persists in being hard for me, that’s shows that whatever I automatically do isn’t going to solve this problem, so I need to find a better option.

STEVE KRASKE

Joan, let’s go to the approach that you two recommend in your book, which emphasizes relationships, learning, imagination and engagement. You organize the book around this acronym – “SURE.” That stands for “stop, look and learn,” “unhook” for the “u,” “revise the script” for the “r” and “engage your difficult person” for the final letter, the “e.” Let’s take this a letter at a time. The “s” is “stop, look and learn.” That means what?

JOAN GALLOS

Well, it means when you find yourself feeling something is difficult, a relationship isn’t working, we have a problem here, the first thing to do is take a step back, and that’s the stop. What’s going on? Why do I think this is difficult? Help me find a way to — Ron Heifetz has a wonderful expression of “get to the balcony.” How can I step back, look down on the situation and try to understand what I’m really facing. Sometimes just taking that step back to understand what’s happening enables us all to say, “Hey, I can learn something that’s going on here.” So, stop, look and learn is our shorthand for “Let’s take a diagnosis of what you are really facing.”

STEVE KRASKE

Lee, let’s continue with the acronym here and go to the “u” in the word “sure,” which stands for “unhook.” Unhook, what, exactly?

LEE BOLMAN

Unhook from whatever feelings are getting in the way here. Typically with difficult people we tend to experience very strong feelings, most commonly either a lot of anger or a lot of fear. If I get really angry, I almost automatically try to attack the other person. That usually doesn’t help. If I’m really scared, I may just retreat from the person, but that doesn’t solve the problem either. So, after stepping back, then I can begin to ask myself, “What am I feeling? What’s happening that’s causing me to feel that?” and “Can I let go of those feelings so that rather than just acting impulsively and emotionally, I can actually use my head?”

STEVE KRASKE

Joan, the “r” is “revise the script.” “With a new script,” you write, “you can develop and rehearse alternative responses that help you try new behaviors, set boundaries, communicate more directly and stay on task.” You’re emphasizing a fresh approach here. Why?

JOAN GALLOS

Well, if we go back to our metaphor of the dance, clearly the way in which I have been choosing to engage with my difficult other isn’t working, and where that first script came is my automatic natural response in any situation. So, if that’s not working, I need a different approach, and what that’s going to take is some practice. It’s really going to ask me to think about what beyond my normal, automatic, knee-jerk response might be a way to behave here, and because it isn’t the automatic way in which I would be approaching the situation, I really need to think of it as writing a new script, practicing it and helping it become automatic in the same way that professional musicians will practice for hours so that muscle memory helps them if they have moments of forgetfulness and stage fright. They build confidence by literally rehearsing a way to perform. That same principle is in the revise and practice a new way of relating to others.

STEVE KRASKE

So you’re saying actually, Joan, go in front of a mirror and practice or turn to a spouse or a good friend and say, “Listen to this. Am I making sense? React to this for me.”

JOAN GALLOS

I think that’s right. You can do it alone. You can write it out. You can practice it. Anticipate how the other might respond. In some sense, you’re preparing for a role, and the role is a different way of interacting with someone you find complex. If others will listen to you, it’s terrific. I personally find that in front of the bathroom mirror with the door closed is a very comfortable place to practice.

STEVE KRASKE

Lee, the “e” in “sure” is “engage your difficult person.” Meaning what?

LEE BOLMAN

Once I’ve been able to step back, unhook, get beyond the feelings that have threatened to overtake me, and I’ve come up with a new script, then I’m ready to move back into the relationship with the person and engage them, try out some new approaches and see if, if I change what I’m doing, does the other person adapt? Does he or she start approaching me in a somewhat different way? And does that enable us to move in a more productive direction?

STEVE KRASKE

And if it doesn’t happen, Lee, when is it time to walk away from a business relationship? Because in the book, you refer to it as “evolve or exit.”

LEE BOLMAN

Not all relationships are going to be fixable, and probably most of us have somewhere in our life have been in a situation where we gave it our best, and we couldn’t. What the message of the book is that you need to have a real strategy for trying to solve a difficult relationship, and basically what our

message is, “Try the sure model. Try the step back. Try the unhook. Revise and engage, and give it your best shot. And give it some time. Don’t expect instant improvement. But if you give it your best shot, and you give it some time, and maybe you’ve checked with a friend or a mentor or whatever to get their advice, and there doesn’t seem to be any hope that this thing is going to get better, then often it’s time to exit, to say, “I’ve done what I know how to do. I don’t know how to make this better. There’s no sense in killing myself or suffering for months on end—and people often do suffer acutely, very powerfully in feeling anxious, in feeling weak, in feeling ineffective. A lot of the negative feelings that we can have about ourselves. If I’m stuck there, don’t stay there. I need to get out.

STEVE KRASKE

You know, Joan, based on your experience, how successful are business, how effective are they at teaching managers how to deal with difficult people and just guessing your answer here, I’m wondering to what extent is the business community missing a bet here by not engaging in this area more directly?

JOAN GALLOS

It is a complex set of issues that personally and professionally I can tell you many of us are really unprepared to handle, and in many cases, people who have been successful their whole lives can actually have a career derailed or stopped when they run into someone who is deeply difficult for them, and they don’t have the skills and strategies to handle it. If we go back to the fact that it’s so automatic in human nature for us to be in a difficult relationship and assume the problem is always in the others that I think the same thing happens in organizations that if there’s a difficult relationship, the boss or the boss’ boss will take a side, and rather than provide the kind of training that’s needed to help this relationship get on more positive and solid footing, they’re apt to push someone out or support someone and have another feel unsupported, unsuccessful and leave these difficult relationships with neither side having learned a whole lot about how to avoid this in the future. We wrote the book for individuals, but this morning, actually, we were talking about it, and I said, “What a wonderful way for an organization to create a culture of learning and a positive way of relating than taking this SURE model and using it in their own teaching and training programs so that everyone is moving away from the automatic response of, ‘If something’s wrong. I gotta fix somebody else,’ or ‘If something’s wrong in this relationship, one of us has to go.’”

STEVE KRASKE

You know, I thought this was really interesting, Lee. You guys say that people always have more options for handling difficult situations than they tend to recognize. Why is it, then, that people almost always view difficult relationships the opposite way? That they don’t have many options?

LEE BOLMAN

LEE BOLMAN: One of the major reasons is because they get hooked emotionally. There’s a long — research in psychology long ago found that the more intense the emotions — intense emotions are good in one way. They

help me run fast. I'm highly motivated to do things. But unfortunately, they don't help me think very broadly or in very creative ways. In order to be able to do the kind of broad-gauge thinking that I need, I need to get out of the emotional turmoil and to step back and then start looking for new options. And people often don't think to do that. They just get — they stew about what's wrong with this person, why is this person so terrible, and get stuck there.

STEVE KRASKE

You know, one thing that I appreciated about your book, *Engagement: Transforming Difficult Relationships at Work*, was how realistic your difficult-boss scenario was. I'm wondering, in the situation between Vicky and her boss, Michael, Joan, Vicky had a key asset. Vicky had an ally, a mentor, a man by the name of Peter. How important is that for someone who's engaged in a difficult situation like that?

JOAN GALLOS

It's absolutely essential and for two reasons. One, basically everyone can use help and guidance from someone bringing an objective perspective on the situation and help you understand some of the options that might be available to you that you don't see. So it's just a whole lot easier to deal with a difficult relationship when you're not alone. But the second piece, and I think what makes Peter so valuable is Peter helped Vicky navigate some political dynamics in that organization. He was internally trusted. He could be her savior if things became inordinately abusive or he found that Vicky was really unable to cope with some of what was happening there. But equally important, he was a source of verifiable information to key decision-makers in that organization that Vicky's got skills. Vicky is trying to manage this, and yes, you are right, Vicky is promotable consistent with the norms, values and expectations we have in this organization. So, Peter as friend and someone who can help Vicky see options. Peter as very important political ally to make sure that Vicky is not going to lose from being brought into what everyone already knew was someone very — a relationship with someone very difficult to work with.

STEVE KRASKE

Well, our listeners will have to read the book to find out exactly how that relationship played out, because the tension grew as I read the book, and I was very eager to hear how that thing played out. Joan Gallos, thank you so much for your time today.

JOAN GALLOS

Thank you, Steve.

STEVE KRASKE

Lee Bolman, thank you as well.

LEE BOLMAN

Steve, a pleasure.

STEVE KRASKE

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