

Marsha Acker: Hi, everyone. I'm Marsha Acker, and this is Defining Moments of Leadership. Today, I'm talking with Mark Franz about the leadership skill of curiosity over knowing, and how it plays a pivotal role in our leadership. When I say pivotal, I mean game changing pivotal. Curiosity is one of those things that is intellectually easy to understand. I can say, sure, of course I'm curious or of course I want to be curious. Then I think in the moment, in the heat of a moment, it is way harder to be curious sometimes.

I have recently had my own experience relearning the value of asking questions instead of continuing to assert an idea, and it was simultaneously hard and well worth it. What I'm excited for you is to meet Mark. In this episode, he's going to tell a story about a time when he was leading a large scale change and the moment that he reached almost out of sheer frustration and how he turned it into one of being curious rather than continuing to push ahead, and the difference that it made for both him, the people around him on his leadership team and the organization overall.

Before we get started with that, let me tell you a little bit about Mark. He is a video game industry veteran who's worked across multiple aspects of video game development and who I've known for many years. He has successfully scaled organizations from 20 to 3,000, and had the opportunity to lead some amazing games, including Ultima Online and League of Legends. He's currently the director of production for Bella Games and Dublin Ireland, working on the company's multiplayer online cooperative game, Project-V, which I can't wait to see.

He is a leader who is known and respected for his ability to build great teams that are high performing. I love this quote from Mark. He says, "One of my first jobs on any team is to create space for everyone to speak and be heard." It's the responsibility of a leader to make it as easy as possible for everybody to share their thoughts. Mark is a huge believer in curiosity, and I think you'll hear that as we dive in. Let's dive in. Mark, welcome. It is lovely to have you on the podcast. Thanks for joining me.

Mark Franz: Absolutely. Thank you.



Marsha Acker: We've actually known each other for a number of years, and you and I have had lots of conversations about leadership. There's endless amounts of books written about leadership. I think that sometimes what we don't quite do is talk about those uncomfortable moments that stretch us in some way. I know they become part of the fabric of how we all define our own model for leadership. It's why I wanted to ask you to be one of the first guests on the podcast because it was our conversation that sparked the inspiration for it.

Mark Franz: Yeah, that's wonderful.

Marsha Acker: You are a video game industry veteran. How did you get into the video game industry to begin with?

Mark Franz: I've always loved video games. Since I was a kid, I was just obsessed with them. I had a friend that worked in the video game industry at a really great PC game company called Origin Systems. He said, "Hey, it's incredibly creative. It's very technical. I think it's right up your alley." I moved to Austin, Texas, and lived there while trying to get in the company. I finally got in and just had an amazing experience from all sense of the word amazing. Then I just stayed with that in my career. I love video games, I love playing them, I love people that play video games, and I love making things for that audience. You're trying to find fun with a product and just relentlessly keep finding those really fun moments.

Marsha Acker: I love that. Using innovation to find fun. The whole podcast is really about what I'm calling defining moments of leadership. I think we all have them, the defining moments about action, behavior, language, these very small moments that transpired to have an impact maybe on you, on others in some ways. If you think back to what was maybe your earliest concept that you had around leadership, what comes to mind?

Mark Franz: I think a lot of what I observed were very serious people being very commanding and demanding, and definitely a few leaders who didn't work that way at all that were really inviting and collaborative and really wanted to listen to you. I think now you see a lot of

progressive thinking in terms of how you lead and manage teams around making video games. Back then, it was just a couple of kids in a garage just doing their absolute best to make something awesome, but just really not having a great sense of how to actually lead a team. I didn't have a great role model in the early days. You'd see some fear and intimidation, demands with no conversation. That sort of thing.

Marsha Acker: As you describe that, the scrappiness comes to mind for me. There's a certain level of just dive in, get it done mentality. Yeah. In all fairness, that probably serves in some ways for startups and companies just getting off the ground. Is it one of your values?

Mark Franz: I don't know its one of my values, but I've found by really understanding what it is we need to do and why. You can look at something from a bunch of different angles and you can find a solution that gets you there, and you can discover skills you didn't know you had that got the job done for that moment. I will wonder how deeply are people really thinking creatively about how to solve something with a lot of constraints. Typically, a good team can figure that out.

Marsha Acker: Tell me a little bit about a moment that really stands out for you, a defining moment of leadership. What was happening?

Mark Franz: An incident happened where I learned a really valuable lesson in a very painful way. I realized why I was having friction with Empower team. I love working with autonomous teams. I love giving teams a problem and just the excitement around getting their hands around the problem and working to solve it. The approach I was taking before was just the wrong approach, essentially giving them directions rather than giving them problems. You ask a lot of questions. You position a lot of options. You invite that debate in inquiry. I think the other one was always be curious and have the courage to do so. You're not doing anyone a benefit in holding back valuable feedback from someone. You're really only harming them or let them run in a direction that's not beneficial. I think that's another big takeaway.



Marsha Acker: I think feedback is something that some leaders struggle to give it, some struggle with the style in which they give it, some struggle with less about the message and more about trying to refrain from the reactive response maybe in the moment versus more thoughtful response. How has that informed how you handle feedback?

Mark Franz: I remember I met someone who just broke down crying. I think it was just like, "Ah, get me out of here. Get me out of here." You can't cry at work. You can't be upset or emotional at work. I think I just carried that. I don't think I ever said that, but I definitely composed myself accordingly and would've never shown any sign of vulnerability with a team like that. It just wasn't done.

Marsha Acker: I think that's true for a lot of us in American business. It certainly informed my leadership early on. My very first job, my boss would say, "It's work, not personal." That phrase was constantly used. Emotions, asking people what was their experience, none of that was welcomed at all. I think the other thing that is so true for many leaders is just that context, right? It's needed in the organization. I have a vision, I see it, and we're going to head in that direction and what I need you to do is just do it. Just get on board and do it. I think it's very common. I would imagine that many people listening to this can locate a similar situation where if you've been responsible for anything in the organization, regardless about a team level, an org level, a department, a whole organization, you run across many of these moments where time is of the essence and just need you to get moving.

Mark Franz: I still encounter decisions like that. I'll call it almost a civil war. I was really at my wit's end. Actually, it was a bit frightening that it just wouldn't stop.

Marsha Acker: Can you say a bit about what was at risk?

Mark Franz: Essentially, their professional direction and the things that they're passionate about and their work and what the organization needed them to do. People are saying, "You pulled a bait and switch switch on us," and I was like, "The organization is changing and you're

needed to go in this direction. We're all capable of it. We're going to do a lot of work to help move us in this direction," and it did not sit well. I think what was at risk for the organization was just a loss of execution, the potential inability to organize and complete major, major work that needed to be done. It was really clear that this was at risk for the organization.

I had a general understanding of what was at risk for the team members, but it wasn't a decision that we had made after some discussion, hearing the responses and saying, "We've heard you and we're going this way." That coincided with this advanced facilitation class where things were still very hot, you asked for a hot button topic to actually facilitate. I remember thinking, "Don't. Please, don't anyone bring this up." [crosstalk 00:10:08] That's what everyone wanted to talk about, and I was just like, "Ah, just shoot me. I don't want to be here."

The conversation came up. As you're facilitating, myself and some of the other people in the leadership team we were just right back at, "Okay. Thank you. I hear you. I've heard you and this is why we're going to do this." I remember one team member saying, "You're doing it again." He's so upset. He was so upset. I was like, "What? Explaining to you what I've been explaining to you over and over again? What is the problem?" He's like, "You don't listen to us." I said, "I've listened to you. Here is your argument. I have heard you." Just everyone in there kept saying I'm not listening to them. I was like, "Am I losing my mind?"

Marsha Acker: I asked you all to have a dialogue. What happened in that was actually it started to be much more of a monologue and the actions of move and oppose, setting direction, and you were getting so much resistance from the group. That it was actually getting very directed at you rather than being about the topic.

Mark Franz: What you did was you took myself and another senior leader, you put us behind a barrier. You made this makeshift barrier where they couldn't see us and we couldn't see them. You asked them to talk about essentially how that impacted them personally. I was just sitting behind that makeshift wall. It was so painful. It was so

incredibly painful to hear ... This was real pain. This was real. These people were really, really emotionally upset.

Marsha Acker: I think about changing structure and that's partly why I just asked you to step out to change the structure of what was happening in the conversation and have everybody continue a dialogue just themselves and then actually put you in a space where you could listen without feeling the need or ... Actually, I asked you not to say anything. But I think, structurally, in that moment, one of the other things that was happening, not just in that leadership team, but in the organization, it was a norm in that organization, was making space for what sexual dynamics would call the language of affect. The caring concern or impact or emotion of people, it wasn't particularly valued. It was definitely ... There was a larger norm in that system, what you and I were talking about of this is work, not personal, so keeping it out. I don't think it was just you. I think it was also part of a system norm, and what felt like it got released in that moment.

Mark Franz: I just didn't know that it is causing this much pain to actually have not truly heard them. These are people I care about. I wanted a strong organization, I wanted confident, capable team members who are doing something they loved. I was hearing just sorrow and pain from so many people, not all the people, but so many people. When you said, "Come back in," and you had me stand in the center of the room and tell people what I was feeling now, I was weeping. I couldn't. I just was like, "I didn't want this. I didn't mean for this. I didn't know it was causing this much pain. I didn't hear you and I'm sorry."

This is the most remarkable thing where someone who had been totally opposed to it raised their hand and said, "I'm in." I was just like, "What?" Then other hands start going up and they're like, "We're in. We're in." I just stood up and I looked around and everyone was just like, "Yeah, we're in. We'll do this." You said, "Let's take a break." When we came out of there, you stopped me and said where was I at, and I was like, "I don't understand what just happened." You said, "Leadership is what just happened." That

so blew my mind what leadership can be and needs to be in certain moments.

I think since then, it's continued to have me dive deeper into what all can leadership be. It's not just great context. It's not just great direction and clarity. It's not just collaboration and creating a workspace of empowerment for the team, it is listening both on the logical, but allowing the emotional to come in. It opened up so many doors for me. I was asked, "Why are you so uncomfortable with people bringing up emotions at work?" The first thing is because it's just not the place to do it.

Then getting a little bit deeper, I said, "The analogy it's like someone's has a rusty jar of nails and they're saying, 'Stick your hand in there.'" I'm like, "I just don't want your jar of nails. Keep it to yourself." I think I was learning to ... I don't have to put my hand in the jar of nails. What I can do is say, "Wow, those are some really sharp and rusty nails. Let's talk about that." For me it made it about I don't have to go in there with them, but I can hold that space for the person to talk about it and understand what's going on for the person.

Marsha Acker: I love that metaphor, actually. What strikes me in the conversation that we're having right now as it's like the art of being with other human beings. I think there's so much that we encounter in business and work and life that is about the interactions with others and how to navigate those. Mark, I'm curious. What was your takeaway? How does that inform how you lead today?

Mark Franz: I feel more comfortable. I think in general, if I go back to early, early days of my career, I just love getting stuff done. I love winning. I love. I think there are definitely moments where it could be abrasive, would be maybe a nice way to describe it, and I just don't think that that's scalable. There was this law and order approach to the way I did things. I think one of the lessons I learned was that law and order doesn't really generate trust to the leader. It creates predictability, but it doesn't necessarily create trust because it doesn't feel like it's about you. It feels like it's about the law.

Again, it can be a very abrasive way to do things. When I go to where now, it is I think far more about the person and the people, and connecting them with them in a way that feels very authentic to me. I think it's a way I possibly always wanted to interact with people, to actually truly love a coworker like, "You're a wonderful person." I think it helps me. It's a part of the team to feel a part of the bond of the team, both on an emotional, but on a goal level. I think that's been one major impact, is just being able to connect with people, and even if they seem to be bad, they're coming from something that you can talk about and you can dig in that and have better results as a team member and as a team.

Marsha Acker:

There's a phrase of assume good intent. I use it often, but I love how you bring it to life in the really core belief essence part of that. It's not just the phrase, it's this is a great way to approach other human beings. In both of your stories, I hear a lot of personal work that you've done to make space for things that maybe didn't come quite so naturally. I think the job all of us have as leaders is to find range, the ability to set direction and inquire about people's feelings.

The ability to make moves and oppose and create space for others to do it as well. I think it's about finding the things that you are really good at that just come naturally. Then like a singer has vocal range, where do leaders find range in their own leadership to be able to go from over one end of a spectrum, all the way to the other end of the spectrum when it's needed, when it's called for in the moment? I hear that a lot as you share both of those stories of just the personal work you've done to do that. It's lovely.

Mark Franz:

I do think it's range because it's sensing that something different is needed here and having the skill to actually behave and act in a way that leads to success in that moment, and that every moment is going to be different. I think adding the authentic vulnerability to your range can be a critical force multiplier on what you're doing. I think having the range and being able to sense who you need to be for the team, for the organization, for the team member and for yourself, and then having the skills to do it.

Marsha Acker: Do you have something that you say to yourself in those moments?

Mark Franz: It's always curiosity. I think learning to switch from judgment to curiosity of what's [inaudible 00:19:30] there. Now, it's very reflexive for me. I think it's two forms of inquiry. One is really obvious of what is going on. Let's dig in there and find out what's going on. But I think the other one is for me, of why am I responding with exasperation internally? Pausing and saying, "What's going on with me? What does this situation actually need?"

Marsha Acker: You're asking an internal curiosity an external curiosity, and even in an outer context curiosity. Well, Mark, we are getting close to the end of our time today, and every podcast will end with a quick speed round around some questions. Are you up for it?

Mark Franz: I think so. Yeah.

Marsha Acker: This is the first thing that comes to mind. Just fill in the blanks to these phrases. Leadership is?

Mark Franz: Is leading a team in the right direction.

Marsha Acker: A piece of advice I would give to my younger self is?

Mark Franz: I'd say, cool your jets, assume good intent. That will resolve so many issues and scraps I got into my younger self. Yeah.

Marsha Acker: Awesome. One thing people sometimes get wrong about me is?

Mark Franz: That I'm always cool and calm. I mostly am. I can get a little fired up.

Marsha Acker: Something that brings me joy is?

Mark Franz: When I see players playing the game that I'm making and really having a blast and talking smack to each other, that is joy.



Marsha Acker: That's awesome. When you look forward to the future, out in the distance, what kind of leader do you want to be?

Mark Franz: A more widely impactful leader. I think there are challenges where I could have an effect outside of the current set of problems I'm trying to solve. There's more broadly global in nature. That's the leader I aspire to be.

Marsha Acker: I loved this conversation with Mark. He is mindful, intentional, vulnerable, curious, which are always that he has grown and stretched his range of leadership, sensing that something different was needed and then his ability to bring it in the moment. Mark and I took a deep dive into two crucial aspects of leadership that really come out in his stories. It's the space of listening on the logical and then making space for the emotional with empathy and curiosity.

It really reminds me of some of the work from Pippa Grange and her book, *Fearing Less*, where she says, "It is scary to talk about soul or love in our hyper-rational data-driven world, but I'm convinced that these are the missing pieces in our potential. In fighting fear, this is the only genuine way to talk about change and becoming fearless." It's so powerful. It feels like one of those lessons that, again, is simple to understand intellectually and then in the moment can be so challenging.

I can certainly relate to this story. I don't know about you, but this story or this tension that Mark would've had around leading change and wanting to move quickly, and then also really needing people to get on board with the change and make it happen. I vividly remember that moment in the room with Mark and his team. I wasn't really aware of what was happening in their system, but then very quickly, the topic was in the room and the heat rose fast. I think there are lots of ways to work with that. But one of the ways that we worked with that in the moment was applying a lens of structural dynamics around it.

Mark in that moment was making moves, structurally, in the language of power and getting it done. What was happening is he

was experiencing opposition, the action of oppose in the language of affect. His team was offering reasons that they didn't think it would work and also what the impact was going to be on them. Mark was saying, "I hear you," but the team didn't feel heard. Structurally, there was a lot of move and oppose in the conversation, but what they were doing was experiencing and they were speaking in different languages, power and affect.

Those two languages can feel at opposition with one another. It's partly where people will have the experience of feeling not heard or feeling like you're talking past one another. What I did was just help them hear and listen to each other really differently. Mark didn't really need to do anything other than listen and then share with his team what it was like to really hear them, but also hearing them and the impact that it had on him, which the thing that ultimately began to shift what was happening in the conversation. Then being able to speak in the language of affect, to make space for it and to say, "Look, I see you."

Then as you hear in Mark's story, all of a sudden the barriers come down and there's a new understanding that begins to emerge in the collective conversation. I'd sum it up in this way. If you find yourself in any moment wanting to lead change or you're just putting forward an idea that feels like you're getting a lot of resistance to, find a way to position yourself on the periphery of the conversation so that you can really listen to what's being said. You can even ask your team to just talk about you as if you weren't even in the room and to give you permission to just listen without the need to have any answers.

Then after a while, find an opportunity to share back with them what you heard and more importantly what it felt like for you to hear those things. Then just practice only asking questions for a little while. Thanks for tuning in. If you go to teamcatapult.com/podcast, you'll find the episode page which contains links and downloads. If you're interested in the language of structural dynamics or on our workshop on advanced facilitation, I'll post a link for more information in the show notes. If you'd like to connect with or explore opportunities to work with Mark at Bella Games, you can find him on LinkedIn and we'll post that and a link to his bio in the



show notes as well. Until next time, keep growing your leadership range and defining your own model for leadership. I'll see you again soon.