

Marsha Acker: Hi everyone. I'm Marsha Acker and this is Defining Moments of Leadership. Today, I'm talking with Ahmed Sidky, as we explore what it looks like to bring inquiry and a human-centric focus into your leadership. This really resonates with me because I spend a lot of time working with leaders who like me, have a background in technology or scientific fields, and then find themselves leading others and feeling a bit kind of out over their skis in how to lead change. Ahmed shares a really poignant story of a time when he first started at Riot Games, as they were experiencing exponential growth and how he was called to walk his talk in placing people and relationships at the center of his leadership approach.

Let me tell you a little bit about, Ahmed. He is the Head Of Business Agility at Riot Games. President of the International Consortium for Agile and co-founder of the Business Agility Institute. And he's also known as Dr. Agile. He is a well known international thought leader on business agility, and he combines over 15 years of software development experience with his research from his PhD in agile transformation to help leaders and knowledge workers achieve measurable and sustainable organizational agility by being agile, not just doing agile. He's the co-author of the top rated agile adoption book *Becoming Agile In An Imperfect World*. And he lives in Irvine, California with his wife and three kids. So let's dive in. Welcome.

Ahmed Sidky: Thank you. It's great to be here, Marsha with you.

Marsha Acker: I'm so excited to have you today, this whole concept around the podcast for these defining moments of leadership, you and I have known one another for quite some time.

Ahmed Sidky: We're probably coming up on 14, 15 years now.

Marsha Acker: That's crazy. And we connected around this concept of agility and facilitation and coaching way, way, way back.

Ahmed Sidky: When it wasn't a thing still.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. Well, I reached out to you because you had written this dissertation around maturity and you and I connected so much around things like it was a journey and wanting to bring this work of humanity and people into that space.

Ahmed Sidky: And we're still on that journey till now.

Marsha Acker: We've both sort of gone lots of different directions. One of the things that I appreciate having known you for so long is your willingness to

be vulnerable and share some of those for the sake of learning. I know that's something that you care about greatly.

Ahmed Sidky: I do, I do anything that will help more people on their journey and minimize learnings. Not minimize learnings, but if I can save people, some cycles of learning. Great.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. Yeah. Well, which is really what this podcast is about. So I am about taking this concept of leadership, which I think there's tons of books that you can read about it. We certainly, we all talk about it, but I think there's something about leadership being an in the moment, very behavioral choice of going one direction or another. And I think we sometimes have these mental models of leadership of what does it look like? And it potentially looks like someone standing on a stage setting direction and they look poised and that's what I'm supposed to look like. So I think sometimes leadership is also the uncomfortable things that happen behind the scenes and in different moments.

Ahmed Sidky: Totally agree with you. Untangling of the human web of the emotions and sometimes rational, sometimes irrational, just feelings and it's messy. It really is, but that is leadership. Because it's messy, because it's hard, most people don't want to do it. They want to stand on stage and give the big, I have a dream speech, but that's a vignette. That's one, but it takes a lot of work to be the leader that not stands on stage, but that people will actually follow on the journey. That's the part that I still learn every day.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. Well I'm thinking as you're talking, you and I also share Virginia Tech Alumni status. But I often say my degrees were in software engineering and that was certainly my first half of my life. I think that was yours as well. One of the things that I struggled with in my own leadership early on was nobody taught me how to lead other human beings. So I found myself out over my skis early on going, okay so I know how to do process and take things from step A to B to C, but boy the human dynamics, I needed a new skillset for.

Ahmed Sidky: Oh, it's a whole other ballgame. Process becomes a piece of cake when you talk about human dynamics sometimes.

Marsha Acker: What's the earliest concept that you had of leadership?

Ahmed Sidky: My parents told me that from a young age, I exhibited leadership behaviors, but I do remember a moment. I can't remember how old I am, but talking to myself about the difference between leadership and bossiness and this is something I remember as a kid, because I was sitting in my room and I had these natural "leadership tendencies" with

a group of friends, let's do this, let's do that. Even the small vignettes of this when you look at kids. But I think I got to a point where it became bossy and I started sensing that my friends were not happy. And as kids, you don't give feedback, you exhibit it and I remember it was my, maybe the earliest memory of, self-awareness for me. I never had to struggle to be a leader, but I had to, I think, to struggle to be a good leader.

Marsha Acker: I love this phrase that you're using about bossy. So I got told that early on as well, and I somewhat trained it out of myself. I was an only child, but I grew up next door to my cousin who was just a year younger than me. And so for all intents and purposes, I got to be bossy, or I thought I did telling people what to do all day. And I got feedback from my mom actually, that I was being really bossy and controlling in that situation. And so similar to you, I remember sort of beginning to tell myself all the way to the point where I worked so hard that one of my adult things has been to actually to bring it back and find a different word for it. Because I think we do those things where we learn something and it sets down a pattern and then we give it a label and then potentially we lose some of the characteristics that were helpful about it.

Ahmed Sidky: Yes. I consider myself very fortunate that I didn't lose the leading part of leadership. But I believe, and again, it's a continuous journey I was able to, or at least be more conscious of the transactional part of leadership where you tell people, not inspire and lead people. And I think maybe that's the alternative phrasing for bossiness in my head. It's the tell, tell, tell, verses the inspire and guide. There's a difference there.

Marsha Acker: Well, it sounds like we're hearing some key nuggets about your leadership. So before we get there to maybe where you are today one of the things that this podcast is about is pulling apart some of the, we all have them, those defining moments that I don't know, really laid some framework or groundwork around how you think about leadership. So when I ask you, what's a defining moment for you, what comes up?

Ahmed Sidky: I thought about this a lot. It's hard to find a moment, but maybe a series of moments. And so I'll take us back to a series of moments that played out when I joined Riot. So for your listeners, maybe a lot of them don't know, Riot. Riot Games is a 3000 person gaming company in LA. Maker of League Of Legends, largest game in the world, also eSports. And when I joined them, seven or eight years ago, they were in a phase of exponential growth. And we're talking about exploding, like hiring 45 to 50 people every two to three weeks. That's the

exponential growth. And it was growing and I was hired in to help it stay agile.

They were sort of born agile out of necessity, out of desire to be customer-centric, player-centric, and startups are generally agile, but as they were growing, they recognized they were like, "We want to stay agile." So I was hired to be the Head Of Development Management over there. So that's sort of the context and interestingly, my first vignette into the culture, there was, I'll call him Frank.

Marsha Acker: For listeners, we're not using real names. So just sort of an operating principle here.

Ahmed Sidky: Yeah. So if you look up Frank [crosstalk 00:09:58].

Marsha Acker: You won't find that person.

Ahmed Sidky: Who was the head of dev management back then, going out and finding a boss for himself, finding someone to become a leader in instead of him. And you don't see that in companies. And so he was part of this is like, he was like listen, this role is becoming too big for me. I've never met anyone who has that level of humbleness, self-awareness and he's going out to seek and find someone that can, again, in his perspective and in the owner's perspective, help usher Riot into this period of scale and growth and agility. And so if you can imagine what that says about leadership in a company and a culture. So anyway, it was in that context that I joined Riot.

So I was hired with an assumption, which is help us become and stay agile as we grow. And when I walked in, there was a lot that I did not anticipate to see and that, call it politics, call it human dynamics, call it whatever you want to call it. But it was a lot and it was complicated and it was complex. And it's something I didn't want.

Marsha Acker: But there's a lot going on as you set it up, right? A company growing exponentially, change in leadership, lots of moving pieces and parts. There's many layers to any organization. So, there's a lot of complexity there.

Ahmed Sidky: Yeah. So to paint the picture a little more, so you have this group, discipline, we call them, think of them as department. There's two tribes really inside, one led by a guy named Andy, the other led by Ingrid and it's truly true tribes. If you try to engage the other tribe, the members of your tribe are like, "What are you trying to do there?" It was rough. And one group is focused on sort of agile and the other is focused on project management and they're like, "Well, this is different

than this and they're not cooperating and it's starting to reflect in the company. And so, you're brought into this.

And I walk in and I'm like, "Okay, not what I signed up for." And I want to solve the problem, but not be consumed by it because you can easily get consumed by the, he did this, she did this, they did this and again, previous to Riot, I was a consultant for many years. And I saw politics. I saw a lot of politics, but I didn't have to be part of it. And so the little arrogant ignorant me, looked at this situation and said, I got this. Yeah. I know what to do, here's the tribe. I'm just going to unite the tribe and move on from there. Ooh, Marsha.

Marsha Acker: There's so much about what you're saying. Like, I can imagine listeners at this moment. There are many situations where you find yourself where there's polarization or us versus them kind of mentality. And the other dynamic that I hear you pointing to the pro of being external is I don't have to live in that. I can remain a bit distant, sort of at arm's length and see it differently versus living in it.

Ahmed Sidky: Yeah and being external, I can advise you what to do. I don't have to bear the consequences if it works or not.

Marsha Acker: So there's no accountability here.

Ahmed Sidky: Yeah. And so being in the situation, my first priority was if I'm going to do anything, I got to unite the group here. But how do you unite a group that is torn fundamentally across call it loyalty to these leaders or whatnot, but also globally around craft and identity. But one of my first moments was what to do. A month into the job, having moved my family from the East Coast and a lot of drama around that. Had my own consulting company and it was growing, it was doing great and I walk in, I think the job is one thing and a month into it after onboarding, I see it a whole different thing. And my first moment is what to do with these two leaders, Andy and Ingrid. And keep in mind, Frank is still in the picture and Frank couldn't unite these two.

They, they were very strong personalities. And so after talking to both of them, one moment I remember was to empower and then take power away if you cannot resolve. So laid it out to both of them. And I know it won't be resolved overnight, but tell me a plan. What are you guys doing to heal this and to really make a difference, or you'll both be relieved from your positions. And that's not my style. And you know me for years, that's not who I am. I'm a very nurturing and facilitating kind of person but I think a defining moment in leadership for me was understanding that there's a different range of stances you have to

take. And I, I love, I know you talk about leadership range and really practicing range is very different than knowing about range.

Marsha Acker: As with many things in life. There's the intellectual part. And then there's the [crosstalk 00:15:50]

Ahmed Sidky: A hundred percent. So to take a stance like that, it really went against the kind of leader and the kind of leadership I wanted to promote within Riot. But it was the only way to resolve this. And so I empowered them for a period of time to resolve it. And I said, I am here. I'm willing to facilitate mediate, negotiate, whatever, but I want to give you space to resolve this. Unfortunately, Ingrid opted out. And so now Andy is there saying, "Well, it's resolved, Ingrid opted out. So I'm the only person in the space now." And I'm like, "Well, that's not resolving it because guess what? You have half the department here still feeling crappy about what just happened and that's actually not healing." And so to actually relieve Andy of his position was I think, a learning experience for him to be discussed later. But it was a moment for me to, again, practice that range. I could have easily restructured and moved forward, but I knew that there would remain feelings with this group versus that group.

Marsha Acker: What comes up for me is that often I find just because somebody leaves a group, an org in some way, it doesn't necessarily mean that change happens because there will be all kinds of structures that are in place that still support that, whether that person is there or not. I think it's the challenge of, you hear in teams a lot, well if you walk into a team that's potentially struggling or self identifies and they will often say, "Well, it's that person. This is our problem person." "And then you take that person out and you notice the same patterns continuing." So I'm wondering if you found that there.

Ahmed Sidky: A hundred percent. Hundred percent, the person left, Ingrid left and everything was still as is. And you could say, well, give it a little time and it will resolve. No, I think we had to truly unite the group and you can't unite the group when you had a differential of feelings and power and all that. So had the hard conversation with Andy and he opted to stay at Riot. And I respect that greatly. And we found a new role for him and he thrived in that, but then started phase two or the next moment, which is, okay, you have a group of people that are looking at you. You definitely created some change when you walked in.

You ruffled some feathers, the two biggest leaders left. Frank is still there beside you. Some people have good feelings about him. Some people have questionable feelings. What do you do? And that's where for me, it was, you got to inspire. You got to set a direction. And setting

the direction was something I knew intellectually, but going on the journey to actually create an inspiring vision was a whole different ballgame. It's a person by person, high touch, long time process that you cannot shortcut. You cannot accelerate and you cannot bypass.

Marsha Acker: What does high touch mean to you?

Ahmed Sidky: High touch means you sit down and you talk to people. So I literally had dinner with every single person in the organization, in small groups of three to four. We went out, I did it in the same restaurant, so fairness in my head. Went to the same restaurant and the reason I did it over food was I needed a different setting and I think the first half of it was just talk about yourselves. Let's get to know each other. And it's not a meeting with a closed time. Some teams we ran into the night, why? Because the conversation went on and they wanted to know more about me. And I wanted to know more about them.

Some started really expressing some deep fears that they had about me, about others. Some started interviewing me like, who are you? And what are you trying to do here? And those are all valid. That's high touch. That was a lot of time. A lot of one on one, if you want to call it, a lot of non systemic work, but human work, that's what I call high touch.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. Well, I hear you building relationship and getting to know each other and talking about things that are personal, not just work and having a non-time boxed period of time to talk.

Ahmed Sidky: Yeah. And listening. But I think the art and what I was very conscious of is, I need to listen to them. They have a lot to say, and some of it is venting and that's okay. And I think this is one of the main roles of a leader. It's not to respond to every request it's to get to know people to a deep degree and then set and inspire them to a new future that they haven't even thought of, but is right for them.

Marsha Acker: So what did you do? What were you aware of after you finished? I can just sort of imagine this probably took quite a bit of time.

Ahmed Sidky: Yes. I was aware of a couple of things. One that people weren't inspired for a long time, they were, I don't want to say clocking it in because no one at Riot clocks it in, but they didn't know where they were going. They believed that they were going somewhere good, but they didn't know where. And so what I noticed was lack of clarity, confusion, inspiration. And in between a lot of that is frustration from people, things, processes, systems, blah, blah, blah. But what I became aware of is when you have so passionate people like this, right. Some of the

smartest people I've met. Sometimes all you need to do, is tell them it's this mountain, not that mountain, or it's this mountain, not just grazing in the field. And then once they look through the clouds and they see the mountain peak and they're like, oh, hell yeah, we're going to go there.

And for me, that moment was a term that we called human-centric COO. And it was what are we to the organization at that point in time? And the human-centric COO became the phrase that summarized the ambition, that north star, the vision of we will become COOs for our team, our organization, and so forth. And if you think again, back eight, nine years, what are they going to be in the organization? Where can they see themselves 5, 10 years. Inside of Riot or outside? What are they? And it's this COO concept, but human-centric being the key word.

Marsha Acker: I love that phrase because it's, if you think about the core roots of those human being, even what we started talking about and COOs are typically known as the process people, they implement, they get things done, but you're combining those two.

Ahmed Sidky: I had to lead by listening and providing a vision, but I didn't have to. This is where I engaged others and truly made it theirs, how to get to there. But the vision, the envisioning and setting it and articulating it and inspiring using it and making it vivid in people's heads. I viewed that as my role. Now, did I view it as my role from day one? No, I learned that that is my role.

Marsha Acker: I'm really struck by that because my experience of you over time has been that I think you're really great at setting a vision and articulating it in such a way that you bring your passion and energy is somewhat just palpable in the air and that people will often orient around that or it inspires others. But what I'm appreciating about the story that you're sharing, at least in this moment in time is finding different aspects that were needed in the moment, and then getting feedback from the group about what they were missing. So sometimes it's needing to listen and people needing to be heard and seen and feel like they've got a voice in something. And then sometimes it's the move. It's where are we going so that we have a direction that we can orient around. I'm curious about you and as you talk about what you notice about the impact of that now of having that role there now, what's the impact it's had on the organization.

Ahmed Sidky: TBD, we're still rolling this out. In the gaming space, you have what we call executive producers. And they lead the game. You have one of two choices to consume the executive producer with everything, the single

leader. And it is a lot from job bands to comp, to strategic planning, to product decisions, to understanding customers and all that, people problems. Or you build a human-centric, COO that can truly run the organization from a human-centric perspective, not just from an operational perspective.

Understanding that in a knowledge environment, in a creative environment, it is about the people and not just about the systems. Doing this properly will create tremendous leverage to the leader to actually focus on what we care a lot about at Riot, which is building better products for players, because it's really hard to do both. Lead a great team and build a great product because both are very consuming. So I'm very optimistic about what the future holds for Riot and how we're evolving.

Marsha Acker: That's great. What was challenging about this moment for you?

Ahmed Sidky: So as a leader with a technical background, this is not what I wanted to do. I wanted to design systems. I wanted to roll out big processes and systems. And as agile as I am, I know that humans is a part of it, but it is human space. You go up and down in emotions, you get carried away with people. You start to develop biases without noticing, and then you have to check yourself and then you have to... It is exhausting, truly exhausting. And there are days where I ask myself, "Dude, why?" But I care deeply about our mission at Riot to be the most player-focused game company in the world, this idea of customer centricity, player centricity.

But understanding that to do that, I have to resolve these things but not be consumed by them. Resolve them, but not be consumed by them, resolve them in a human-centric manner, not in a transactional manner, but I told myself it would be worth it. And I'll tell you this, I do believe it was and still is worth it. Because the relationships that I've built, the people that I believe I've changed, helped grow. You know what? That's more rewarding than anything else for me.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. I hear that in the story as you tell it. If you were to give it a headline, what's the lesson that now, today informs how you lead.

Ahmed Sidky: I would say not what I expected, but what I needed, because guess what, I changed. That's part of this process. Like I'm telling this story now eight years ago, it seems like I had it all figured out, oh hell no. I learned a ton along the way, because I'll tell you this as a leader sure, consume yourself with everything else. But know that your investment in relationships is what's going to solve most of your problems. So to that listener, who's like, this is all nice and fluffy, I challenge you. Try

the fluffy. It is solid. It is solid because it works. You may not feel comfortable doing that, congratulations. There's a growth opportunity for you. But it is solid, it works. Why? Because guess what? You're dealing with another human on the other side.

Marsha Acker: One of the things that I, in my experience happens a lot. And I think it is a trap of listening is somewhere in there believing that you'll get everybody to agree with you or that people will like you because you've established a relationship like that. There's the relationship building aspect of it, of listening to people, understanding who they are. And then there's also the aspect of what I hear you articulating is making a decision and knowing that not everybody might agree with it, like it, love it. So what do you do in those moments?

Ahmed Sidky: I think it's the framing. I never went on these listening sessions for people to like me. I truly went on it to build trust, which is different than people liking me, very different and to listen to understand. But someone like Andy, I don't know if you've ever liked me but that didn't stop me from, at some point he came my number two again. And again, it's out of, we have a level of trust and respect and we can get work done, but it's not about liking or not liking. It's about setting a vision and finding the right person to execute different parts of this vision. I think really, really, really there's a curiosity. I don't know what else to call it, but either you've hired the wrong people, so figure that out. If you've hired the right people, then be curious about what they have to offer.

Marsha Acker: That's really powerful.

Ahmed Sidky: Thank you.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. We are coming up on the end of this and I'm just appreciating the stories that you're telling. Both of the story and the organization, but also the personal journey and finding a growth moment in that. It actually sounds like many growth moments. Before we end, what we're doing here is every podcast we're ending with a speed round of questions. So this is like, I'm going to say a phrase and you're just going to say the first thing that comes to your mind. Are you ready?

Ahmed Sidky: No, but let's do it. That's the whole theme of the story I never was ready.

Marsha Acker: Okay. Leadership is?

Ahmed Sidky: Human-centric.

- Marsha Acker: A piece of advice I would give to my younger self.
- Ahmed Sidky: Build trust.
- Marsha Acker: One thing people sometimes get wrong about me is?
- Ahmed Sidky: A lot of things. That I'm bossy.
- Marsha Acker: Something that brings me joy?
- Ahmed Sidky: Learning.
- Marsha Acker: And when you look forward into the future, what kind of leader do you want to be?
- Ahmed Sidky: Full range.
- Marsha Acker: That's awesome. I love talking with you. I love talking with you at any moment in time. If people want to get in touch with you. Sure. What is the best way for them to do that?
- Ahmed Sidky: Go to my website, ahmedsidky.com. I try to capture all my little life nuggets there. There's videos, everything's out there for free, just use them and learn from them and you can contact me through that.
- Marsha Acker: Yeah. Perfect. Thank you. It was lovely to have you.
- Ahmed Sidky: Thank you so much.
- Marsha Acker: All right. Take care.

Marsha's Closing Remarks and Take-Aways:

I can relate to Ahmed's story about finding yourself in a situation that requires something entirely different from you as a leader than what you thought you were signing up for. That has happened to me so many times. I think I'm saying yes to an opportunity and yet what I'm unknowingly saying yes to is a leadership growth moment. My husband and I joke about this lightheartedly. I will say, I think a life lesson is coming my way, and I'm really struck about his story about being called bossy as a child. I think that was another piece that really stood out for me in our conversation because our childhood stories are so foundational to the work of leadership development. And they are always in the room with us, even as adults. I believe it is part of our work to locate the story and to begin to write a new narrative in our conversation.

In our conversation, he said, "I didn't have to work to be leader but I did have to work to be a good leader." You hear him in that statement writing the new narrative, the narrative from I'm bossy to I'm becoming a good leader. And if you put that into the language of structural dynamics, what he's saying is that he was good at the vocal action of move, setting direction in a conversation. But what he had to learn to practice were the vocal actions of bystand and follow. And these are the actions of inquiry.

And you hear this really come out in his stories. He talks about sitting down and taking the time to conduct listening sessions with people. And these weren't just sessions to make more moves or introduce new ideas, but they were about listening to hear, rather than listening to understand. It was a great conversation. Here's my bottom line takeaway from today. If we are not building relationships and carving out time for conversations, we are not leading. And that is a lesson that hits hard for me as well. I think it's so easy to get lost in the daily shuffle and grind of business and moving things forward. And it's so important to also take out time to build relationships and have conversations I feel like I relearn that lesson all the time.

Thanks for tuning in today. Keep growing your leadership range and defining your own model for leadership. You can find out more about Ahmed and his work at ahmedsidky.com. That is a rich resource of information. He has tons of videos up there. We'll have a link to that and all the other information on the Podcast Episode Page at teamcatapult.com/podcast. I'll see you next time.