



Defining Moments of Leadership with Marsha Acker and Lyssa Adkins on the Gift of Leading from Behind



Marsha Acker:

Hi everyone. I'm Marsha Acker and this is Defining Moments of Leadership. I think it's pretty common to think about leadership as something that you do from the front of the room or by being in front of a group of people. But, what would it look like to lead from behind? I think this is such an important concept to think about exploring and expanding our leadership range. My guest today is Lyssa Adkins and our conversation touches on several aspects of what leading from behind looks like for her. So, from her own defining moment to her coaching stance to what's next in using agility for social change, all bring elements of this concept of leading from behind into the forefront.

So, before we dive in, I'll tell you a little about Lyssa. I consider her a dear friend and colleague whom I have known for many years and I think one of her gifts is the ability to articulate a passion or need that she sees in our world and inspire others to action and I've watched her do this over and over again. She and I connected so many years ago around a shared purpose of changing the way people think about work and leadership and while our work has taken us both in many different directions, it's such a joy to come back together on this podcast and reconnect and dive into her thinking around some of those passions and where she's at right now.

If you don't know Lyssa, she is an internationally recognized agile thought leader and speaker. Her book, Coaching Agile Teams, is still a top ranked book years after publication, and I think it's a must-read for Agile Coaches and it's now also available in audiobook format so that makes it easy for those of us who might be listening as we walk or run or drive. She co-founded Agile Coaching Institute (ACI) which equipped over 10,000 people in the must-have skills and mindset shifts of excellent agile coaching.

Her Agile community focus is amplifying women's voices, which is why she is a founder of the TENWOMENSTRONG programs. And, her current focus is improving the performance of top leadership teams through insightful facilitation and organization systems coaching. Making difficult decisions faster with clear alignment, unknotting challenging multi-department impediments, creating the conditions for smooth organizational delivery, helping leaders take up the "Agile transformation" that is theirs to make...this is where she thrives and helps others thrive. So, let's dive in.

Lyssa, welcome to the podcast

- Lyssa Adkins: Thank you. I'm really glad to be here in conversation with you because I never know what's going to happen when we talk.
- Marsha Acker: I think it was May, 2011 was the first time that I had an opportunity to connect with you. And we aligned over this, call it a work of love, this process of writing, learning objectives around facilitation and coaching for agile coaches. And, I consider you a dear colleague, dear friend, and so thankful for so much of the work and I think the gift that you've brought into the agile space and so I'm delighted to have you here today.
- Lyssa Adkins: Thank you. It's so great to hear you talk about the dream that got hatched that we hatched together. Boy, if we could just help people with some basic facilitation and professional coaching skills, it would make a world of difference. And I think it really has. I feel like we, and a handful of other people created something really amazing for the world that's been giving back, you know, for a long time.
- Marsha Acker: I love that it's still a conversation today. Well, Lyssa, I would love for people to get to know you a little bit from your own leadership perspective. So, when you think about the term leadership, what's your earliest memory that you have of leadership?
- Lyssa Adkins: My earliest memories of leadership are what I would now call management. But at the time, I didn't really have a distinction. It's from being a child and hearing my father complain bitterly about his boss, who was in management, and there was a big difference between management and workers in my dad's life. And I heard a lot about how bosses basically don't do anything but play the political game, and the notion of leadership, like, I guess, nominally, you would call that manager a leader, but the notion of leadership what I think of it today was not even involved. It was just sort of like someone who tells people what to do.
- Marsha Acker: I think that's a common stereotype this, I tell people what to do or I boss people around.

Lyssa Adkins: and it's something to recover from, right? Cause it's not just a stereotype. It is so and continues to be so in certain industries where things are much more cut and dry or mechanistic, that sort of "leadership", which is really bossing people around, is more successful than in knowledge work and innovation and inventing work where that sort of leadership definitely doesn't work really at all.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. Where would you say that your leadership journey began?

Lyssa Adkins: My leadership journey began with getting introduced to Coactive Coaching. Now, prior to getting introduced to Coactive Coaching, people would have called me a leader because I was like the director of a project management office and I had more and greater responsibilities inside of organizations, and I manage people and I had those responsibilities and that scope of influence. Looking back now, none of that adds up to what I hold as the bar for leadership now. And that bar started to get set with professional coaching school, which is a funny place for it to get set, I think, but that was the first place I encountered the idea, that leadership is an inside job. It is not only or maybe not even so much about what you can accomplish as sort of the heroic leader with a great vision and you can galvanize people to do what you think they should do. It's not that, it's the ability to be leader or full which to me means that in any moment you are ready to work with what is to the greatest effect that you can help a group of people or an entire organization have.

Marsha Acker: It does seem odd, right? That you would discover leadership in a coaching journey. And, as you say, that resonates for me as well. I had a very similar experience, but I'm curious about, what was it about that training that shifted for you or what shifted for you in that?

Lyssa Adkins: I think two major things shifted. One is that I built the confidence and the belief that I could be authentically myself in every moment, and that was actually leadership. So that's one and very related to that is the skill of self-management that, in any given moment, a leader knows exactly why she's talking and that things leaders do with other people are intentional. So, like, that sort of skill of self-management has been so critical in helping me get past all of my own limitations and limiting beliefs related to how I need to show up in the world to be successful. And allows me to constantly ask the question what's of the greatest service now. Okay. 10 more seconds have passed. What's up the greatest service now? It's a constant question in every moment and I think that's the dance leaders do holding out a really long-term vision of creating capacity and capability in organizations, not just getting through the topic of the day.

Marsha Acker: There's so much in what you're saying, I'm curious what's something that's happened along the way for you, that you would call a defining moment.

Lyssa Adkins: I'm pretty sure I'm having defining moments in the same area over and over and over again. Maybe just like slightly different players or maybe at a different octave or, maybe a slightly different circumstance, but essentially the same lesson. And the lesson is that to lead I don't have to be out front. And in fact, being out front, which is sort of my knee jerk reaction, my unexamined reaction to life, that actually disables people around me and so it's at the antithesis of leadership.

Marsha Acker: Say more about what does it mean to you to be out front.

Lyssa Adkins: So here is a super, like down to earth, a little bit embarrassing scenario that just happened a few weeks ago. Right. So. Here we are my daughter who's 24 years old, totally capable adult, she lives in her own house, pays her own bills. Right? There's no reason that I should think that she can't handle the situation, but here we are walking through an airport together and as we're doing this, I'm finding myself getting stressed out because I'm noticing time is short. I know we need to go through passport control and I am like making a beeline through the airport and just navigating every little thing.

The thought in my mind is like, why do I always have to be the one navigating the airport? Now, when I turned around to my daughter and I said, "Oh, hang on. I realize I'm feeling resentful because I'm the one out front navigating where we need to go and all the things need to happen to get on this plane. And I'm like, I realize you're completely capable. Would you please take the lead?" And she's like, "Yeah. no problem." I thought to myself, I want to be the one looking at the shops and looking at the people and not worrying about where we're going. So, what's so beautiful is that we have a deliberately developmental environment in our family, which means that we're conscious about each of us, my husband, my daughter, and myself, her partner. We're all conscious about what thing we're developing. And we tell each other about it so that we can get help from each other. And so like, she knows that I'm recovering from this, micro cellular, deep commanding controlism. Right. And so, when that happened, she's like, oh, you need my help. Okay, great. So, it was awesome. She just took off. I followed her. I got to notice that there's a really interesting set of restaurants in this airport that I'd never noticed before. And I thought, oh, I don't always have to go to the lounge. I can actually come down here and get a bite to eat. It's something different. Right. So, like, I would have never seen that had I been so focused on getting to the gate.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. There's so many things that I love about that story. One that stands out for me is that you had the awareness to catch yourself in the moment. And I love that when you say I finally, I found myself getting resentful about it because I think that is such a, I know for myself, anytime I catch myself even thinking the thought it comes with a little bit of an eye roll and a huff. I love that

reframe that you created for yourself around. And it's a little bit like the question of, and, and what's your contribution to the situation that's playing out. So there's one part, awareness which I've heard is a value for you around leadership, but the second part is I think another place where we just don't always naturally go and that's to name it. Like, look at the difference that creates in just that small segment of an example of being in a moment that you could have just ignored it, skipped over it, kept going and instead, you chose to name that you were feeling resentful and, and the part you were playing in it.

Lyssa Adkins: And now it's no fuss, no muss. I imagined she doesn't even remember that moment. It just flowed through without any residue whatsoever.

Marsha Acker: I'm just curious if you've ever been working with someone and you named that and they didn't know what to do, or they weren't quite sure how to respond.

Lyssa Adkins: Yeah, I'm sure I have. I can't think of an example right now. Well, I mean, so this is a parallel example, not exactly what you're asking about, but I was working with a group of executives recently and, I noticed that what was going on in their conversation was that it was sort of like point counterpoint point counterpoint point counterpoint. And there wasn't very much building on each other's ideas. And, so I said to them, I said, let me offer you a practice before you make the next counterpoint. First of all, check in with yourself and ask yourself the question, what is my intention in making this counterpoint? And if you can locate that intention, then maybe tell the person what your intention is before you make your counterpoint. Because what's happening right now is that people can't even fully listen because as someone else is making their counterpoint, the previous person is sitting there going, I don't know, are they trying to support me, are they trying to shoot arrows at what I just said? Like there's so much going on in the neurobiology between people that they can't even listen because they don't know where people are coming from. And when I said that there was such a gigantic reaction among this leadership team. And one person in particular said, well, I don't know why we do that. We presume that we all have good intentions. And I said, it's not about whether your intention is good or bad it's because yes, you can have that presumption that you all have good intentions. I believe that too. Now go a level deeper. What is your intention in that moment? Is it to support that? Is it to poke holes in it? Is it to bring up something you're worried about? And, I just couldn't get the group off of that thing of, oh, you made us look at a pattern and working at the level of the human system is so new to us. We're so used to working only at the level of content and point counterpoint and, stonewalling, I have definitely had situations when I bring up the pattern level of things that people have a very hard time going there.

- Marsha Acker: I think that's true. I, there is something in what you're pointing to about drawing out or noticing the dynamic or the pattern that's happening in a group and it being perceived as a judgment when its real intent is just to name what's happening.
- Lyssa Adkins: Exactly. Exactly. So I have had that experience a lot and I think the only thing that sort of breaks through it is to just harp on the fact that, hey, this isn't my judgment, I'm just holding up this object that you all haven't seen before and asking you, what do you think of this object? And I think it takes about a dozen times before the group starts to relax enough to look at the object, in this case, a pattern, right?
- Marsha Acker: Yeah.
- Lyssa Adkins: I've been learning a lot about trauma informed coaching and trauma informed collaboration and the role of our bodies. And, I'm starting to get convinced that the next place for me to go in my own leadership is to work with that a lot more myself, and be able to just very straightforwardly, bring it into the groups I'm working with more because especially these days as I watch groups, I'm working mostly with leadership teams now, as I watch leadership teams interact, I think, wow, all these trauma bodies are interacting with all these trauma bodies and very few people, maybe no one in this conversation has their full executive functions online right now. So I think it's a really important place for maybe me to look into and so thank you. That's a new thought that just came up in this conversation.
- Marsha Acker: Yeah. Well, for those who are listening, who might not know what trauma informed coaching is, how would you describe it?
- Lyssa Adkins: I think it's simply the awareness that our bodies have a response to things in our environment, way faster than our mental faculties can process. It's called neuroception. So, our neurobiology kicks into action before the rational thoughts have occurred. And, anytime we perceive a threat in our environment, which happens a lot because it doesn't have to be a physical threat, it could be a threat to our self-identity or ego, or even an idea we have, someone is offering a counterpoint and it feels threatening. We don't necessarily say to ourselves, oh, this is feeling threatening, I don't have to feel threatened, I'm actually not going to be killed in this moment. What happens is that our neurobiology takes over and dumps a bunch of stress hormones and shuts off all of the executive functions that we need on board to have a constructive conversation. And so trauma informed is simply the recognition that that does happen to human beings, and that to help groups understand that that happens and help them detect when it's happening so that they can reregulate and actually co-regulate their nervous systems and get back to a more functional state together.

Marsha Acker: That sounds really helpful in the vein of staying in conversation with one another, rather than vacating the conversation or tapping out because you're triggered in some way.

Lyssa Adkins: Yeah. I really like the idea that we don't have to say, let's take that offline.

Marsha Acker: Yeah.

Lyssa Adkins: A really hard thing just came up, let's take that offline, which means let's never deal with it. Right. So, I think that we're just going to continue to be in a world of change and turbulence and that will create anxiety for people. And, it's creating anxiety in the moment but it's also kicking up anxieties and triggers from earlier experiences that we've all had that, or run the gamut of different kinds of experiences. So, yeah, I'm super interested like how more effective groups could be if they were paying attention at that level.

Marsha Acker: I'm curious, what has happened in your own leadership that draws you into the space of trauma.

Lyssa Adkins: That's a really good question. You know, I'm now realizing there was a moment in a yearlong program that I took the programs called integral facilitator. And, one of the main themes in that program is self as instrument. That as a facilitator, what you bring, what you can be with, the range of topics and states and dynamics that you can work in fluidly vastly impacts where the group can go. Right? In other words, the place you stop is the place where people stop. I got feedback in that program that, although it seems I'm listening and although it seems like I can say back what someone just said, that people felt that I was not receiving them energetically. And for a while, I had no clue what people were talking. And people kept saying things to me like, you should really take an embodied leadership course, you should do more somatic coaching training. These are all ways to get more embodied. And I'm like, I don't even know what that means.

Part of this program is a meditation practice. And so, we were all sitting meditating in the morning before we started the day, and one of the little small instructions that came through the air from one of the leaders was just check in with your body and see if you can feel your heartbeat. I thought that's ridiculous, no one can feel their heartbeat. Right. So, I did though. I checked in and I'll be damned I could feel my heart beating in real time and this wave came over me of like, a remembrance, a remembrance of when I shut down feeling in my body and it was at a very, very early age, I would say probably by the age of five. Yeah. And so, it arose because of turbulent life situations where my job was to basically stay frozen. My job was to stay out of the way. And I was very

anxious and worried about what was going on, but I knew I could do nothing about it. And so I literally froze my body. You know. And didn't realize until, 50 plus years that I could have access to all of this wisdom and beauty that, that arises with feeling my heartbeat in the moment and being able to turn on all these other antennae now, all over my being where I could get so much more information and be so much more in the moment and be with people in a way that they are fully received, including energetically and that cracks something open for people. And it cracks something open for groups when leaders can be with them that way.

Marsha Acker: Hmm. Gosh, that's really powerful. There's a couple of things that you've said about your journey and self as instruments, starting with authenticity, being able to tap into who you are. And that was both important to you, and what I'm taking out of our conversation right now is that it's such an unfolding process. Right? So, everything that happened to us early on gets laid down and we, we do what we do for really good reasons.

Lyssa Adkins: Yeah. And that's the piece that I'm really enjoying working with leaders around now, now that I'm trying to understand myself. Now I am not like the most trauma informed anything, but I'm starting. Right. And so, one of the things I love, was told to me by someone in a leadership program I took about a dozen years ago was you're here to teach the lessons you're learning. And so, you know, one of the lessons I'm learning is about to make significant shifts in one's leadership. I'll talk about myself, dealing with these trauma responses from that get laid down, as you say, very early and working with the body itself to shift it. That is essential cause it's not just a matter of picking up a new belief or changing your mind or changing a habit or doing something different.

All of those things can be useful, but if the body is going to win, so over time you might find and just check it out. If you're finding out that all the new habits and belief systems you picked up, you're now backsliding on while there might be something to work on it in your body.

Marsha Acker: That's really helpful. How do you bring that into the room when you're working with leaders?

Lyssa Adkins: So, if I'm noticing that the group of leaders seems to be getting jacked up about something, and I have a sense that maybe some, hijack, amygdala, hijack responses are coming, like when the, the stress hormones get dumped and stuff also, I'll just name that it'll sound like this.

Hey, it seems like things are getting a little bit hot. We don't need to back away from the topic, but let's back away from the intensity for a moment. I would suggest that you take three deep breaths. Do you have a different way to do it? And actually, recently someone, one of the executives said, yeah, I do. I know about this thing called box breathing from the Navy Seals. And so he led the group through that. So, anything that it'll just create an interruption, and I'm looking forward to just doing it much more directly. I'm aware like this is really new learning for me, all this trauma informed perspective. And I'm aware that in my next engagement, I'm going to frame it up in our designed alliance early on in the engagement. This is part of what I bring and part of what I think is necessary.

Marsha Acker: You're a professionally trained coach with lots of certification behind you. I'm curious what's the role for others just in developing their own leadership around this?

Lyssa Adkins: I'm not sure that there are any more roles in the world that are not leadership roles. At the very least, we're now called to lead our own lives, which is a fairly new innovation. I mean, it wasn't long ago that you just simply did what your family did. You did what your father did typically. It wasn't long ago that there was no choice. Right? So, it's fairly new for us to be the leaders of our own lives. And I think it's important for everyone to pick up some skills to be happy, to be fulfilled, to feel like, you know, having this earthly life was worth it.

Marsha Acker: I couldn't agree more. I love what you say about, I don't think there are any more roles in this world that don't require leadership. I say often, my daughter, I think demonstrated leadership at the age of three. She could express what she wanted and was really clear about some of those things and could guide us as a family and direct us. And so, I think there are so many places for people to step into their own leadership.

Lyssa Adkins: And I think it's also, we are birthing these generations of people coming into the world with a much clearer idea about having a purpose that feels fulfilling to them, finding situations, people, work that align with that purpose, and this is the way societies move and evolve. Now of course that's not true for everyone. Or everyone, even in the generation of our children, but it is true for more and more. And I think it's just about right on time too. If we look at where we've had, where we're headed, if we look at, I can so deeply appreciate the gift of the industrial era. I have been a recipient of those gifts. I live in a comfortable house. I don't worry about running water or lights or food, or I have a beautiful warehouse sized computer in my phone, you know, there are so many amazing benefits. And, of course, now we're feeling the downside of the way we organized our economic activity and we've organized what we think success is.

You know this idea of growth for growth's sake and this is something that future generations won't have a choice to ignore like mine did.

And honestly, I just went to sleep. I think like a lot of my peers just participated with the machine, you know, and tried to struggle and strive to be successful. And, so I think when I think about these precious humans coming into the world, being purpose and impact driven, I'm like, well, that's a pretty smart, evolutionarily evolutionary response to where we are.

Marsha Acker: Yeah, I love the idea of thinking about, purpose and value. For someone who's listening to this podcast and who might be early on in a leadership journey and hearing things like it's an inside game and it's about knowing yourself and it's about being authentic and then wondering where they might be as how do I get started on that or what in the world does that mean? What would you say to that person?

Lyssa Adkins: Well, the good news is there's a tool that I've been using to mature my leadership for the last eight or 10 years now. And it's called the leadership circle. And it absolutely does that marriage between, what are the limiting beliefs or the unexamined assumptions that run your behavior that keep you from really enjoying the full fruits of your impact. And those fruits of your impact are absolutely being purposeful and visionary and, mentoring and developing other people and having systems view so that when you see things, you have a way of articulating it to help other people see things. We said they're like very specific competencies and outward things that leaders do. Absolutely. Right. And so, I'm not saying that none of that's important, but the piece I want to pick up on is the idea that your inner meaning making completely colors the way all those skills and competencies come across to other people and whether they're willing to follow you or not.

Marsha Acker: Hmm. That's really helpful. The leadership circle has definitely nailed it from the perspective of not just their research, but their diagram. I think if for anybody who's familiar with it, their, diagram says a lot.

Lyssa Adkins: Yeah. And if you go to leadership circle theleadershipcircle.com, then it's the really straightforward description of the diagram and everything that we're referencing.

Marsha Acker: I'm curious about what's next for you. So, you've talked a little bit about trauma coaching, but what do you, when you look forward in a year or two, where do you imagine yourself?

Lyssa Adkins: I'm getting more and more concerned about the multiple existential crises that are facing the human species, of which I am a member. I have a big stake in us

doing well and continuing to do better than we have actually have been doing. And so, I don't know what will come to pass, but I know that I feel compelled and I feel like a calling actually to start being the instigator or the host or the catalyst or something like that for a worldwide conversation in the agile community about, what do we agilest know how to do, how do we know how to be, that could be useful to people who are already working on these planetary level challenges that we're facing? I really would love to see us in our vein of being so good at experimenting and inspecting and adapting and being guided by the empirical process. I'd love to see us do some experiments, with people who are already on to ways of helping us mitigate or cope with the impacts of these multiple crises at the same time, that actually don't care at all about national boundaries.

Marsha Acker: Sounds like agility for social change.

Lyssa Adkins: That's the next leadership challenge for me is what does it mean to be a leader of a network of networks? And I feel like the word leader is even the wrong word in that case, but I'm not sure what the word is. I do know that the millennials and zoomers have a lot of knowledge around this, and so I have a lot to learn.

Marsha Acker: What is it about that that feels like it might stretch you from a leadership perspective?

Lyssa Adkins: Well, I really long to do something about what I would consider the karma that I have contributed to her collective karma. You know, the years that I participated in oil and gas extraction, for example, without even at all, examining you know what I was doing, not even being aware to examine it at the time. What has my life story and my set of experiences and skills, what is it all adding up to for something that might be useful and impactful in supporting these next generations that don't have the luxury of ignoring these existential crises? So, I guess that's what drives me.

Marsha Acker: Well, I think if anybody could start a movement in that direction, I think it would be you.

Lyssa Adkins: Thank you. That feels really good to hear. My immediate thing is like this limiting belief inside of myself, which is like, who am I to do that? But I know that voice now and I know that that's an old echo that I no longer need now. So I look at it and pat it on the head and go there dear it's okay. It's okay.

Marsha Acker: I love that. You know, it's so helpful, I think, to be able to name those voices in our head, we all have them for sure. But I love how you talk about not letting it

roll, not letting it decide. That's really nice. Well, Lyssa. I end every podcast with a speed round.

Lyssa Adkins: I can't wait.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. Are you ready to dive in? Okay. Here we go. Leadership is...

Lyssa Adkins: Taking responsibility for what you want and the change you want to see in the world.

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

Lyssa Adkins: Enjoy the moments and stop living in the future so much; most of that stuff doesn't happen anyway.

Marsha Acker: Nice. One thing people sometimes get wrong about me...

Lyssa Adkins: They think I've got it all together. I do and I don't. I have it all together but let it all hang out, I guess.

Marsha Acker: Something that brings me joy...

Lyssa Adkins: Nature. When a blossom turns into fruit or vegetable, that to me is a magical moment and I can't get enough of it. I can't even believe it happens.

Marsha Acker: Beautiful. When you look forward to the future, what kind of leader do you want to be?

Lyssa Adkins: One that helps people navigate the hard times without freaking out.

Marsha Acker: We need some of that. I just want to say, thank you.

Lyssa Adkins: You're welcome.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. I really appreciate it. I can imagine that there might be a host of people who would like to get in touch with you. You've talked about a number of things. We'll put links to some of the stuff that you were mentioning in the show notes, but if people want to get in touch with you, what's the best way to do that?

Lyssa Adkins: The best way is through my website, Lyssaadkins.com, but you have to know how to spell it. Here we go. L Y S S A A D K I N S . com

Marsha Acker: Perfect. Awesome. All right, Lyssa, thank you so much. It was a pleasure.



Lyssa Adkins: It's such a joy to be with you, Marsha. Thank you for starting this podcast series and helping me have some insights real time here with everyone who's listening.

Marsha Acker: Perfect. All right. Take care. Thanks.



Marsha's Closing Remarks and Takeaways:

I hope you enjoyed Lyssa's story and I love how we started with the small example of a defining moment for her of what leading from behind looks like and then our conversation continued to bring more examples of where she leads from behind all the time in many ways. From noticing a pattern with her daughter and leaning in and making a request to how she works with leadership teams and holds up a mirror so they can take their own actions to articulating a dream she has around leading a network of networks and using agility for social change. All of those fit squarely into what leadership from behind can look like; it's about supporting others. And, we'll place the links to the programs and tools we shared in the show notes so you can find those at teamcatapult.com/podcast.

You heard Lyssa talk about naming patterns of behavior in groups like point and counterpoint and noticing when the tension is high. If you want to learn more about language and working with behavior, check out our programs on Advanced Facilitation and Change Behavior in High Stakes on our website teamcatapult.com and stay tuned, we have an exciting announcement about those programs coming up shortly.

I really appreciate you being here. If you want to continue the conversation, come join me on Facebook in the Defining Moments of Leadership Community. Keep growing your leadership range and defining your own model for leadership and I'll see you next time.