



Defining Moments of Leadership with Marsha Acker and Shannon Ewan on Breaking Through Limiting Beliefs



Marsha Acker:

Hi everyone. I'm Marsha Acker and this is Defining Moments of Leadership. Today marks the 14th episode of the podcast and this is our last episode in season one, so I'm getting ready to take a pause for the summer and I'll say a little bit more at the end of this episode about what's coming next. But for now, I'm really excited. My guest today is Shannon Ewan and we're exploring what it takes to become more aware of our self-limiting beliefs. These are those stories that we tell ourselves about what we can and can't do, mainly what we can't do, and this practice of knowing where they come from and how to not let the stories limit what we do.

Shannon, we're going to cover all kinds of things about what some of those self-limiting beliefs were for her and then also, I love this angle that we'll talk about, which is how true agility requires both connection with others and it requires us to have different leadership models that look beyond just our traditional hero as leader model that might exist.

Let me tell you just a little bit about Shannon before we dive in. Shannon Ewan is currently the managing director for the International Consortium for Agile in Alexandria, Virginia, where she embraces the challenge of living Agile values every day. She's an experienced Agile leader, coach facilitator and trainer, with extensive business in information technology experience with Fortune 100 companies, small businesses, and US government agencies.

In addition to her work as an Agile and IT leader, she spent several years studying and working outside the US, including a two-year stint as a small

enterprise developer in the US Peace Corps in Cameroon. Shannon is also a certified professional collective coach and holds a master's in international administration. While she accepts opportunities to speak at global Agile conferences from time to time, Shannon generally lives by the motto that happiness exists outside the spotlight, which we'll talk about.

Let's dive in. Shannon, welcome to the podcast. It's so nice to have you here.

Shannon Ewan: So great to be here, Marsha. Thanks so much for the invite.

Marsha Acker: You're the managing director of ICAgile and I have all kinds of questions because we talk about leadership here, and so I have all kinds of questions about what it's like today. But before we dive into today, I'm wondering if you could just tell us maybe a little bit about your own leadership journey and how you got to where you are today?

Shannon Ewan: Sure. I'd say it's definitely been a circuitous one in a lot of ways. I mean, I think back to my earliest experiences with leadership, I can go back to high school, and college, and some of the things that I did there, but I think that framed the model of leadership that's maybe more traditional. More of that sage on the stage, have to know all of the answers type of leadership.

I think a really formative experience for me, was being in the Peace Corps in Cameroon, fairly early in my career, and just being a bit thrown to the wolves, and having a blank slate on a lot of things, and just having to figure it out. I think there's been a lot of lessons that have crystallized for me since that time that I didn't necessarily realize were happening in the moment, that really shaped a lot of my worldview today.

And then I think about I went into the IT world, got into leading consulting teams, and that's how I ended up getting into Agile, and agility, and coaching, and facilitation. In a roundabout way, that led me to where I am today with the International Consortium for Agile.

Marsha Acker: Lovely. From high school, to Peace Corps, to IT, lots of variety. I'm curious about your experience in the Peace Corps. What was that like?

Shannon Ewan: It's very difficult to describe, I think. It's one of those things where I think the Peace Corps says it well on their website. They talk about how most of the change happens on you, the volunteer. And so, I think it's one of those things where you come in wanting to change the world, thinking that you're going to change the world and things do change, but not at all in the way that you might anticipate through the more idealistic lens. Just learning a lot about some of the larger patterns in the world and some of the larger

systems that influence how countries interact, et cetera, and it's really overwhelming in a lot of ways and really humbling in a lot of ways.

I think one of the things that I remember most, is just the connections with my community, what it was like to really become a Cameroonian and become part of that community. It went from I was a stranger and stood out like a sore thumb everywhere I went. Just going from that to becoming Shannon and part of their family and their extended family. And so, that's really what I remember when I think about it. It definitely wasn't all champagne and roses. In fact, I don't think it was truly ever champagne and roses.

Marsha Acker: Wow. It sounds like it had quite an impact on you.

Shannon Ewan: Definitely.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. I'm curious. Is there a metaphor or even just a story that you made up about what leadership was early on?

Shannon Ewan: I think so, because I think you also learn a lot in your formative years about some of the often-mentioned leaders, like Gandhi, Mandela, Mother Teresa, US presidents that we hear about. And so, you have to have some sort of preordained destiny to be a really huge impactful leader. I think having that image as a child while learning lessons from all of those people is valuable, it can also be really intimidating and make you think that leadership is for the few, not the many.

Marsha Acker: That you're really separate from it, or you have to be born into it, or somebody has to anoint you into that space.

Shannon Ewan: Exactly, yeah.

Marsha Acker: Yeah, I think we think about it really differently today, particularly in the Agile world. And then when I step outside of the world of agility, where we're having more of those conversations, it feels like the definition of leadership changes. If you were to think about how you think about leadership today, what would you say or how would you contrast it to your earlier experience?

Shannon Ewan: Yeah, I think that it's really the opposite of what I thought about in those early years. Not that there's not a place for that because I think the people I mentioned and some of the stronger more front of the room grab the microphone type leaders can still have tremendous impact. I'm not trying to minimize that at all, but it's looking more at bringing out your authentic self,

and just being true to yourself, and leading from your purpose, and really taking responsibility for your impact in the world.

We talk a lot in the Agile world about wanting to build leadership at all levels of organizations and really you can't have agility in the way that we talk about it if you have one inspirational leader and everybody else essentially following. You can't decentralize the decision making, you can't have collaborative team behaviors without really creating an environment where people can step into their own leadership and lead from their own values and purpose.

Marsha Acker: I had Lisa Atkins on the podcast just a couple weeks ago and she made a statement that really resonated with me about, I think she said, "I'm not sure that there are any more roles left that wouldn't be considered or defined as leadership as we start to think about leadership today." I'm really curious about how you went from Peace Corps to where you are today.

Shannon Ewan: Yeah. I think about going back to the image that I had in my younger years, of really needing to be able to command the scene. As I grew in my career and was given more leadership opportunities, I think it created a blocker for me because that's not who I am in a genuine way. I joke around about how I believe that happiness exists outside of the spotlight. And so, getting into the spotlight is not necessarily a comfortable situation. And so, with that model of, I need to be able to be there and imitate other behaviors that I've seen, I think that was a blocker for me for a long time.

I can think about a few people who, over the years, gave me some feedback that really helped break that mold for me. I remember at a consulting firm I was working for a while back, I won't quantify the years, but it was a while ago, I was really wanting to move up and I had a conversation with my mentor at the time. I was talking about how I needed to be given a certain platform or an opportunity and his response was, "Or you can create one." That really stuck with me. It's like, okay yeah, it's not about somebody else moving out of the way so that you can move in. It's really about creating the opportunities in all directions.

Another moment I reflect on often, is when I first became an Agile trainer and I was very interested in doing that because I love learning, and I believe that lifelong learning is a fantastic thing, and for organizations to be Agile, you've got to really put a high value on learning. But being a front of the room trainer was definitely a stretch for me being a bit more of an introvert. And I remember some of the feedback that I got from a gentleman I was co-training with, my first-time training, we were debriefing afterwards and he said, "Yes, that sounded canned, and awkward, and scripted. And actually, it was very difficult to watch." I was mortified in the moment because I was



already bringing so much self-consciousness and so it was so intimidated by that prospect.

Marsha Acker: Yeah.

Shannon Ewan: You're intimidated because you're afraid that somebody will tell you that you sound awkward and difficult to listen to it. I think my worst fear was realized in that moment and I think what was interesting about that, was I could tell that he was coming from a place of genuinely caring and knowing that I could do better and knowing that I had something to bring to the classroom.

He was really talking to me about focusing on connection. It's like, you have to connect to the people in the room and you have to connect as who you genuinely are. I think I progressed a lot more quickly as a trainer because of that. Even though I think it took him a lot of courage to be that direct, but I think it took courage on my part to stay in that moment and not just throw in the towel and say, okay, I'm not going to train again.

I think for me, it's being grateful for those who had the courage to give the direct feedback from a place of genuinely caring and believing in me. That's a stance that I try to take now as a leader myself.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. Gosh, there's so much in just that scenario that you just shared of, yes absolutely having the risk taking ... Well, not having the risk, but taking the risk, and being courageous to offer that. And then for you, to be in a place where you could receive it. If you could take yourself back to that moment, what was it like to receive that? Because I'm quite certain, there are many people listening who have been on the receiving end of that feedback and maybe they had a different reaction or maybe the person saying it had a different intent.

Shannon Ewan: Yeah, so reflecting back on that now, I think another seed that was planted maybe before that moment, that served me in that moment, was when we start talking about the paradigm of growth versus fixed mindset. The notion of with a fixed mindset it might just be, I'm a terrible trainer, that's it, it's just the way it is. The growth mindset framing of that is, I'm not a terrible trainer, that session that I just gave was ineffective. That doesn't mean it's me. My delivery was what was off and my delivery I can change. Maybe a year or two prior to that, I may have just self-selected out and said, I gave it a try, gave it my best. It's not for me. I'm going to go back to X, Y, or Z, right?

Marsha Acker: Yeah. I hear the mindset was definitely a part of that. And then, what were you able to do differently or what's the next thing that you did?



Shannon Ewan: Yeah. Well, I think a lot of this journey also, for myself and others I've spoken to, comes from building awareness in how to manage fear because fear can certainly serve you, but you don't want it to overcome you and paralyze you.

Marsha Acker: Yeah.

Shannon Ewan: And so, I think that by getting that feedback, it's like, okay, that happened and the sun still came up this morning. And so, I think that was reframing going forward of, I got through that, now I'm going to work on this and get a little bit better. And also, really being able to take in the feedback and becoming hungry for feedback, instead of afraid of it.

Marsha Acker: I think for anybody who's listening, one of the things I'm appreciating about you, your story as you talk about it, is the ability to step back and view it as it's not a reflection of me as a person or who I am. It's something that I did in the moment. It's a behavior that I had. It's an action that I took. And so I think the separation and the distinction of those two things goes a long way to being able to act on it.

Shannon Ewan: Yeah. And I also think it's done wonders for my ability to believe in the potential of others taking that mindset as well. And as we've developed Agile coaches and trainers over the years, I've seen the ones who, if it really is aligned with their purpose and what they want, their ability to persevere, despite being somewhat ineffective in the beginning because they're learning, it's just tremendous and seeing people become hungry for that feedback and not letting that or their self-consciousness stand in the way of what really is a dream for them. It's also a gift to have gone through it myself, so that I can then empathize as people really take the big swings for things that they really want, but they're not super confident in how to do yet.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. Such a rich moment in time. I'm sure it was to live through it as well.

Shannon Ewan: Another place, maybe a little bit further along that journey, was taking that feedback about connection and leaning into talking about presence and being there for a group or a team for what's needed in the moment. Because I think as a somewhat type A person, I definitely value planning and preparedness, but then you recognize that sometimes that gets in the way of being in the moment for people. I think about someone who is fairly well known in the Agile coaching world, providing the feedback one time about a coaching question that was asked. That question would've been great 10 minutes ago. You get stuck in your own head about what you think is expected, and then you miss the moment to actually be with somebody, and be present, and be in true service of a group's agenda because it's well intentioned, but you're fixated on a certain outcome that maybe is no longer central or in service of the team or the group.



Marsha Acker: Yeah. I think any time we're learning a new skill or we're trying to onboard or do something different, we're not always skillful or masterful at it. And so, it's this process of being in the muck or the uncomfortableness while we figure out, when am I supposed to do it and what does the timing look like and what does it look like to have some idea of a plan in my head, but also be listening and connected to you? A lot of that can feel like multi-layered complexity.

Lots of learning moments, Peace Corps all the way up to what you're doing now. Is there any other moments that really stand out for you along that journey that inform your leadership today?

Shannon Ewan: I've also learned over the years, although it is about being authentic to one's self, it's also about having the range to play in with what's needed. And so I think in the situation I'm in now with ICAgile, and working with somebody who is very visionary, very strong leader, a very charismatic person, has in some ways, brings up the pattern of feeling like, oh, I'm not worthy of being in the same room with that person, or I'm not going to be taken and seen in the same light. I think that thinking is very limiting and it can be very self-sabotaging for people if they're seeing themselves as someone else's shadow. I'm learning more about the power of co-leadership, and the power of leadership teams, and really looking at how do we all work as a team and a system, and getting the whole to be greater than sum of its parts, and that type of thing.

And then, you also realize how you play into continuing the narrative of you have to be inspiring, you have to look this way, or be this way, or have these things in your life to be a strong leader because when you show up like that, show up as insecure, all that does is you're showing up as inferior. And so, you can't hold it against other people for seeing you in that light because they're just seeing you as you're showing up. It's how do you let go of that and find where can I serve best in this particular leadership team or in this duo? Or as a solo leader, it's what does the group really need? Trying to think about all of those elements at once.

Marsha Acker: You said a minute ago that happiness exists outside the spotlight. It sounds like that may be part of your leadership model or your leadership stance. Is that true?

Shannon Ewan: Yeah, I think it is. I mean, I say it somewhat tongue in cheek, but still having overcome a lot of the insecurities that made me fear public speaking or training, being in the spotlight is not the place where I gravitate. And so I think about that, just in terms of the way that I lead ICAgile. And for me, it's become much more about creating space for others to shine. There are things that are done in the background, and behind the scenes, and with



other people that I can see how they work and don't work to create the right environment, but it wouldn't necessarily be something that was obvious to somebody looking from the outside.

Marsha Acker: Yeah.

Shannon Ewan: People might realize that, wow this team is really matured in X, Y or Z way, or this structure and communication collaboration is working out extremely well because of X, Y, Z, and it's really there's all kinds of factors going on in the background to create that environment. I feel like that is where I tend to gravitate. I look for those types of opportunities to influence the whole in a subtle way.

Marsha Acker: We talk a lot about this notion of leading from the front and leading from the back and that's really coming forward for me as I hear you describe your view of creating space and leading and having an impact. I love hearing you talk about even noticing the impacts that you're having and it's just different. There's a quote that I love, "Comparison is the thief of joy." I think about when we hold ourselves up and compare ourselves to somebody who is different, they come from a different place, they have different strengths and different abilities, I think that is the place that just sucks the joy in life out of us.

Shannon Ewan: Yeah. That really resonated with me as a young person because at that stage of your life, everything is about who's ahead of you, who's behind you, who's beside you. In some ways, it does serve a purpose, but when that dominates your thinking, like you said, it's the thief of joy.

Marsha Acker: What happens to you today? Do you catch sight of yourself starting to compare or what's your relationship to comparison now?

Shannon Ewan: Yeah, that's a great question. I think it's definitely there and it can be a knee jerk response or a visceral response to certain things. I think I've gotten a lot better at noticing and then adjusting to having that inner conversation about, wait a minute, what is it about this situation that's getting to me right now or what is it that's motivating me to try to speak and contribute? I think a lot of folks have heard the term one upmanship or it's like, is it the need to stand out? And so, I think, of course nothing is ever perfect, but I think I've gotten better at knowing the sources of certain impulses and when it will serve to act on that and when it's coming from a place of maybe insecurity or self-sabotage.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. Is there something that you say to yourself? I'm just imagining, we all have those moments where it's like the old story that we're aware of and we're working to minimize, but it can creep back in. I think I appreciate the

way you say it. Is there any phrase or anything that you say to yourself or thing that you think that helps bring you back to, oh right it's not that, I'm here now?

Shannon Ewan: That's a good question because I think I've tried to use mantra over the years. I've probably had a few different ones that I'll use. I think one of the things I try to do, is I think about some people who are really important in my life or things that bring me joy and it's like get to that, connect to that and how I would want to be seen by that person, and then allow that to help me inform my next move. Is this a move that I'm going to be proud of five minutes from now or is it going to be a move that I'm going to be apologizing for? Yeah.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. Is this a move I'm going to be apologizing for in a few minutes? That's a good question.

What's this journey been like for you, in terms of we've been talking a little bit about how you think about your leadership today, and I'm just curious, what's something that you'd say to someone who might be in that space of maybe they've gotten feedback that says you're not cut out for this or I don't think you're measuring up to what we're looking for? What would you say to them?

Shannon Ewan: Yeah. I feel like I would go to a place of what is most important to them? What is the impact that they most want to achieve? Because I do think as we talked about earlier, feedback can also cause you to change direction. Sometimes it's valuable. And so, I think looking at that is important and if the desire is, yes, I still do want to do this, it really is looking at how are you getting in your own way? What could you be doing? That's creating this? And trying to do that, again, from a place of truly caring about their development, not trying to make them feel blamed or called out. It's really about getting curious, what's common about the situations where you've received this type of feedback? How could you be influencing? What might you try to have a different result?

And then I also think about just really encouraging people to take responsibility for the impact they have on the world and how they show up because I was thinking about earlier in terms of how a lot of us see leaders as maybe people, we would put on figurative pedestals. I think we abdicate our own responsibilities sometimes when we do that, so it's like we're looking at I'm a victim of other forces, or the external world, or the way things are. And it's like, well, that can be true in some situations, but it's certainly not always true. And so, I think if people can really look at what's common, what am I doing to create this? And then, how do I make sure I'm

not being complacent and letting others have the difficult conversations and take the bold moves or the difficult steps?

Marsha Acker: For sure. Shannon, one of the things that strikes me about hearing you tell the story and hearing some of the steps along the way, is two words come up for me, connection and care. It feels like really that's a thread that pulls through your story, both having experienced feedback early on that may be hard to hear, but you felt like it came from a place of care, and then that being something that you put out into the way you lead. I certainly have had the opportunity to work with you for a number of years, just in various roles and hats and that has certainly been the way I experience you. It's just really, it's lovely I think, to talk about this notion of what leadership looks like and how it can look like coming from a place of connection and care, and it doesn't have to be big, and bold, and in the spotlight, and it can have just as much of an impact.

Shannon Ewan: Thank you for that acknowledgement. We've definitely had an interesting journey, just seeing each other along the way from early facilitation classes to now.

I think another thing I think about, is just the work that's out there in the world, in the leadership and professional coaching spaces, about really getting connected to your purpose and your values, because I think that's also what enables you to get through the tough times, or the awkward moments, or the getting up when you fall flat on your face kinds of things.

If I could think about a thread that unites the Peace Corps experience with working for the International Consortium for Agile, it is that global presence and that global community. I remember at a pretty young age, I ordered a world map and the caption I put on it was, "There are no foreign lands." To me, it's just really important that connection, how we show up.

I see just in times of turbulence, which we've had throughout history and certainly over the past couple of years, that agility can be a unifying force, when we talk to people in all parts of the world and how that's able to bring down barriers. Just looking at that as that work and the conversations and those global connections, are so much more important than someone's insecurity, or a difficult conversation here or there, or having to put in some extra hours to have a breakthrough on something. I think without that, it's easier to take more of a true backseat, not just a leading from the back, but checking out.

Marsha Acker: Yeah, it's really great. Well, I end every podcast with a series of speed round questions.



- Shannon Ewan: Okay.
- Marsha Acker: Are you ready?
- Shannon Ewan: I think so. Yeah.
- Marsha Acker: All right. The first one is complete the sentence, leadership is?
- Shannon Ewan: A journey. I think it's can be a very joyful journey and I really truly think it is about authentically pursuing your purpose, while taking full responsibility for your impact.
- Marsha Acker: Nice. A piece of advice I would give to my younger self is?
- Shannon Ewan: Have fun. I think I stalled and over-planned and overthought a lot of things that in retrospect, could have gone just as well or better without all of that hesitation.
- Marsha Acker: Nice. One thing people sometimes get wrong about me is?
- Shannon Ewan: I have a really somewhat dry sense of humor and delivery, so sometimes people think I'm serious when I'm not, when I'm actually trying to be playful.
- Marsha Acker: Ah, nice. Something that brings me joy?
- Shannon Ewan: Dogs, I would say. I think dogs are pure joy. I also think learning anything new, that's a place where I get joy.
- Marsha Acker: Nice. When you look forward to the future, what kind of leader do you want to be?
- Shannon Ewan: I always want to be looking at building my self-awareness, relationship awareness. How can I show up better in service of others? And I think more specifically, really thinking about how with all of the talk around wellness and wellbeing in the workplace and mental health and looking at a lot of topics that have come up recently, it's how do you really create an environment to maximize that, where people can really be their best? Because I think we have an intention around that and I think there's a lot more of research and work that we can do to create an even better environment for people.
- Marsha Acker: Nice. Beautiful. Well, Shannon, thank you. And I really appreciate you coming and sharing a little bit about your journey and moments that are really

impactful for you. If people want to get in touch with you, what's the best way for them to do that?

Shannon Ewan: Yeah, I think LinkedIn is definitely the best way. I'm out there, yep Shannon Ewan on LinkedIn. I'm usually pretty good at responding within a day or so.

Marsha Acker: Perfect. All right. Well, we'll put a link to your LinkedIn bio in the show notes. Shannon, thank you so much.

Shannon Ewan: Thank you, Marsha. And I really appreciate what you're doing with this podcast. I think you're bringing a lot of great content to folks who are interested in leadership.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. Thank you. All right. Take care.

Shannon Ewan: Bye.

Marsha Acker: I hope you enjoyed this conversation with Shannon. I often say how we think is how we lead and these stories that we tell ourselves about what leadership is and what it looks like, can create self-constructed barriers to how we show up in the moment. I think Shannon's examples really highlight the importance of how becoming aware of our stories and consciously breaking through them is so important. I say all the time, I think we need range in our leadership and that leadership can take on many different forms, which is really my whole intent behind this podcast, is to explore and give us all examples of what different forms of leadership can look like.

I imagine we will all be on the receiving end of feedback at some point or another, either in the past or coming in the future that can really be disorienting. I love how Shannon talks about separating the feedback she received in a moment and making it about her behavior, not about her identity or who she was at the core. And so, I think this is a really simple step that allows us to be able to look at our behavior and know that's different from who we are and the behavior is something that we can take action on that we can change. Even if it doesn't feel like it always in the moment, we can.

I alluded to this at the very beginning of the episode, but this episode marks the end of season one. And if you haven't had a chance to listen to all the episodes in this season, I'd just say, grab your headphones and head to the beach and catch up on some amazing leaders and their personal stories. I too am taking a break for this summer. I'm heading off for some quality family time and I'm so excited about what's coming up. At the end of July, I have a new book that's going to launch and it's really a design to support you in building your model for leadership. You can check out the



podcastpage@teamcatapult.com/podcast, where you can pre-order the book or sign up to be notified when there's more.

I'm super excited about season two. Season two, we're going to stay in this space of leadership, but we're going to expand how we're talking about it. And so, I'm in the process of lining up guests for season two and I'm so excited about it. So, stay tuned. You can find the show notes on teamcatapult.com/podcast. I'll just invite you to relax, refresh, rejuvenate, whatever that looks like for you. I look forward to being back with you in September. Until then, keep growing your leadership range and defining your own model for leadership and I'll see you in September.