



Defining Moments of Leadership with Marsha Acker and Deborah Grayson Riegel on Generosity



Marsha Acker:

Hi everyone, I'm Marsha Acker, and this is Defining Moments of Leadership. Do you believe in scarcity or abundance? Do you believe there will never be enough or do you believe there is always more? My guest today is Deborah Grayson Riegel, and we are exploring a part of her leadership journey that has had her cultivate a generous mindset. She sees generosity as both a mindset and a set of behaviors, with the belief that the more I give, the more I will get, even if I don't see a direct link. I love this conversation, so I'm excited to share it with you. So, let me tell you a little bit about Deb before we dive in.

She is a keynote speaker, executive coach and consultant who has taught communication for Wharton Business School, Duke's Fuqua Business School, Columbia's Business Schools, Women in Leadership Program, and the Beijing International MBA Program at Peking University. She writes for Harvard Business Review, Psychology Today, Forbes, Fast Company, and has been featured in Bloomberg Business Week, The Wall Street Journal and the New York Times. She's the author of *Go To Help: 31 Strategies to Offer, Ask For and Accept Help*, and *Overcoming Overthinking: 36 Ways to Tame Anxiety for Work, School, and Life*. She consults and speaks for clients including Amazon, BlackRock, Google, Kraft, Heinz, Pepsi, and the United States Army. So, I'm excited for you to meet her. Let's dive in.

Well, Deb, good morning and welcome to the podcast. It's lovely to have you.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: I'm so excited to be here. Thanks for inviting me.

Marsha Acker:

Yeah, my pleasure. So, you have what I would call a really deep expertise in leadership and communication skills. And I think the first time we met, it may have been almost nine years ago, we were in a retreat together, and I remember my very first experience of you was someone who was warm and

friendly and engaging and not afraid to name things that were happening in the space that felt like it was a little risky. That was my very first impression of you.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: Well, thank you. That feels really meaningful to me, and I have to imagine that if I was doing that, there was something about this space that felt safe, which is really important if people are going to name what they're feeling and seeing.

Marsha Acker: Today, your expertise is in leadership and communication, but if you can imagine even your 10-year-old self, what would your 10-year-old self have said about where you are today?

Deborah Grayson Riegel: Well, I think my 10-year-old self, first of all, wouldn't believe that I found someone to marry me. I mean, I know that's not related to my profession, but I think that's kind rotten as a kid. In retrospect, I recognized that I had some undiagnosed anxiety disorders, and so that really contributed to me just feeling tense and unhappy a lot of the time. So, number one, I can't believe that somebody married me.

Marsha Acker: Aw.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: And I still kind of feel that way as well. And in terms of my professional self, I think the 10-year-old me would have been surprised that I didn't go to medical school or organic chem, so many people knock me out, but would actually be happy that I found something that leverages my passion and strengths and gives me the autonomy that I've always really wanted, but what wouldn't have been able to name that 10.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. Yeah, I love that. Can you think about or locate the time growing up where you first had a concept about leadership? Because I think sometimes leadership, for many, it can be a difficult concept to wrap your head around.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: Well, I think if I think about myself as a younger person, I'm pretty sure that leadership for me, as it is for so many, was attached to a title. So, I didn't really think about demonstrating leadership outside of having some sort of position. But I would say that the earliest memory of that was when I was in junior high school, which I think the rest of the country calls middle school. We do it differently in New York City. And I was asked to serve on the Manhattan Borough President's Youth Advisory Committee. Manhattan Borough President wanted to hear from young people, what they were facing, what challenges they saw, what they wanted for Manhattan and for the city. And I think having an appointment like that, being asked to be an informant for a leader... Informant sounds like somebody's going to blow up my car. [inaudible 00:05:18] a source of information from was, I think, probably the first time that I felt like I was stepping into a leadership role and my job was to communicate.

Marsha Acker: Wow. How did you come to do what you do today? Did that inform it or was there some other path?

Deborah Grayson Riegel: So, I often say, because I believe it, that I'm basically doing my high school extracurricular activity but for pay. When I was in high school, I was on my high school speech and debate team. I didn't do the debate part, but I did the speech part, and I spent every single day after school learning how to write and deliver presentations. I spent every weekend traveling around North America in speaking competitions. I spent every summer going to, wait for it, speech camp. I know, I was as cool as cool could be. It was a place where my natural talents and my interest in learning some the skill sets really came together. And I think my favorite part of the story was, my junior year of high school. I qualified for the national championships and I was beaten by Ketanji Brown Jackson.

Marsha Acker: Wow.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: And then my senior year, I won the national championship, but nobody wins if you're competing against Ketanji Brown Jackson. So, that was my activity. And I ended up coming back in the summers when I was in college to teach at speech camp. So, it was something that I've been doing for a really long time. I just didn't realize that it was a marketable skill.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. Well, it sounds like you found your passion early on.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: I did. I had a client who once called me the Doogie Howser of communication. I started at 14.

Marsha Acker: Wow.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: And I'm now 50, and I've learned an awful lot along the way, but I did start really young.

Marsha Acker: Did you know this is my passion and this is what I want to do for a living, or was there some moment where you-

Deborah Grayson Riegel: No, I definitely didn't know. I mean, when I went to college, I was pre-med, and then as I mentioned, organic chem.

Marsha Acker: Yeah.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: Which is often described as... Organic chem as what separates the doctors from the psychologists, which I think is absolutely right. And I was recently talking to my dad, and my dad said the same thing. He went to college pre-med, and then organic chem. So, many must have that as part of our legacy. So, I definitely didn't know. When I graduated from college, I had been performing improv comedy in college, which was also a really good way for

me to learn how to think on your feet. And so after college, my improv comedy troupe and I all moved to New York. For me, it was back to New York, and for many of them, it was to New York for the first time. And we all got jobs as administrative assistants so that we could support our comedy habit.

And at a certain point, we sat down as a troupe and said, "Are we really committed to being in entertainment for the rest of our lives?" because it's that hard. And four people said yes, and two of us said no. I was one of the no's. And then I realized I had to figure out what to do. So, long story short, I went to social work school at Columbia University, realized halfway through that I had gone to grad school, but I didn't know what I was going to do with it. And I had an advisor who suggested I take a course in training and staff development. And I took that class at the Columbia School of Social Work. And then immediately it clicked, and I said, this is it.

Marsha Acker: That's fantastic. I love just hearing your background a little bit and some of the journey that you've had. And I'm curious, along the way long path, if there's a moment that stands out for you as kind of a defining moment where you learn something about yourself or learn something about your leadership.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: Yes. So, before I was out on my own as a coach and consultant, I had a colleague who had gone out on their own and was sharing with me, "Come on in the water's fine," for when I was going to be ready to do that. And then I was ready to do that. And I remember reaching out to this colleague and saying, "Okay, I'm ready." My colleague's response was so not what I had expected. I had expected a really warm welcome into the consulting industry, and my colleague said, "Yeah, I'm not sure you're ready for this." And I was stunned. I mean, I was stunned because it was so different from what I'd been hearing. I was surprised I was really hurt. Like, wow, did they know something about me that I didn't know? And I couldn't figure out what had changed in the course of a year or two to go from, "Can't wait until you're in the world of consulting," to "You probably won't be able to do this."

And I just couldn't wrap my mind around it. And I was really upset, and I shared the story with my husband who was quite clear about what had happened. He said, "Yeah, they see you as competition," which is something that had never occurred to me. I thought there was something wrong with me. And in that moment, I converted my hurt and anger and surprise to a commitment. And the commitment that I made was, assuming that I was actually able to do this, to run my own business, that I was going to be as professionally generous and welcoming as I could possibly be and assume that it was my job to lead the way for others and let them know, "Come on in the water's fine." And so that professional, welcoming and generosity has just paid off in psychic dividends, [inaudible 00:11:20] dividends, community dividends in more ways that I could possibly imagine.

Marsha Acker: I love the shift that you're talking about that you made, and I hear your husband's comment of, or maybe being able to see something different in the

relationship that maybe you weren't catching sight of at that moment, but I'm just curious about... How did you switch it around? Or how did you make sense of what was happening in that moment so that you could flip into a much more generous mindset, which is certainly how I experience you?

Deborah Grayson Riegel: I think I allowed myself to mourn the loss. So, I had expected a welcome, had expected an invitation, and I don't think it was the snap of the finger. I think I had to work through the loss of what I had hoped for and what I had expected. And in working through that loss, I chose to do something productive with it because it felt so destructive.

Marsha Acker: It also sounds like you located a value for yourself.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: Yes, I think so. I also think about my other values, certainly a value around learning. And so I was determined to learn something from this. I also have a value around adventure and achievement. So, those are two different values. And I think I decided that I was going to think about this journey to consulting as an adventure and that I was going to support my own achievement, and I wanted to support the achievement of other people. Even if the achievement is I'm considering leaving my full-time job and going and then spending part of my time building my business, that's an achievement. And so I wanted to honor all of those things for myself and for others.

Marsha Acker: I love it. I think the other thing that's coming up for me is, even just paying attention to the broader economic times right now and listening in on an awful lot of conversations that I know leaders are having about downsizing and layoffs and cutbacks and difficult conversations, I'm just curious about this tension that sits around scarcity and generosity.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: Yeah, so I think my scarcity mindset shows up in a couple of different ways. So, one way that it shows up is, at this point of the year, we're in October and I've had a great year. And then I start to go, "Oh, I got to do this all again next year, and the year after and the year after? What?" So, there's definitely a part of me that says, "I did it." And then I go, "Oh wait, you're not done." So, there's a little part of, will I have the wherewithal, the strength, the product to offer, the connections, the relationships to keep doing this every year.

Marsha Acker: Yeah.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: So, that's number one. And number two is something that actually came to me in therapy really recently. This was a very new insight that was really helpful to me, which was... When I was 15, my parents got divorced. And when they announced that they were getting divorced, my immediate instinct was, "I'm out of here. I do not want to be in this house. I do not want to live here while my parents are figuring out, moving out and all this stuff. This feels horrible and I don't want to be here." And I was 15 years old and I did not have my own resources and there was no place I could go.

So, that feeling of I want to get out of here and I can't, I'm trapped is something that I never ever want to feel. And there's a part of me that is about generating business, and maybe even more business than I need or that I should be doing because I've got this visceral memory of, I never want to feel trapped and I can't get out of here, whether that's I can't get out of this profession, I can't get out of this house, I can't get out of a situation, even though currently I don't have any situations that I'm trying to get out of, but that's logical, right? This visceral.

Marsha Acker: Yeah, I love that story. I think there's so much about patterns and structures that happen in our childhood that sit in our adult day to day conversations every single day.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: It's helping me make sense of me, which is, I think the work of a leader, right?

Marsha Acker: Yeah.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: Doing the work to make sense of yourself. The work that you do and I do is about helping leaders make sense of themselves, make sense of the impact that they're having on others and choosing more effective paths. And there is a whole bunch more around leadership, but those areas aren't my expertise. That's when I send them to people, people like you, colleagues. That's why I want to have such a lovely network, is because I only know what I can help somebody with and there's a whole bunch of stuff that just doesn't fall into my bucket of expertise.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. I think so much starts with the work you do on yourself, and that the rest of it is... It's not that it's not necessary, but can't replace, I think, that personal work. So, yeah, something that seems so simple and yet probably one of the most difficult things I know I've done in my professional life. It's one of the things that I love about the story that you just brought in and the recent insight that you've had that even connects back to some of your early values, but I think we're always catching sight of things as we go. I often think about it as it's unfolding an onion. This is what I can see today and make sense of. And then a month from now, something else will happen, another level of insight comes, or another connection point comes for me.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: And I think the work of leaders is to be willing to look at it. And like an onion, as you unpeel it could make you cry, right? But if you unpeel it and just keep putting it aside, you actually don't benefit from the work.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. It's lovely. So, Deb, I'm appreciating your story around generosity. And we've heard a little bit, but how does it inform how you think about leadership?

Deborah Grayson Riegel: For me, generosity is both a mindset and a set of behaviors, right? So, the mindset, there is enough, I am enough. I don't need to hoard resources; I

don't need to hoard information. And the more I give, the more I will get, even if I don't see a direct link, right? So, those are some really important mindsets. So, not quid pro quo, not tit for tat, any of those things. So, those are some mindsets that I have that I have cultivated over time. I don't think that those were original mindsets for me. And I think about my work as just running lots of experiments. And so a generous mindset, and then the behaviors that emerge from that. So, yes, I could do this, but I know someone who would be better at it. Yes, I could keep all of my intellectual property to myself, but let me put it out there on YouTube for free because I think it would help someone. And it's interesting because I think about my mom who will often ask, "Well, what if somebody takes it? What if somebody takes it?"

And I appreciate her protectiveness around me, protectiveness around my intellectual property, and I'm never worried about that. I'm just never worried about that. And I've got a part of me that says, if somebody takes it, there must be something going on for them that made that feel important to them to take it. And so that's part of the generosity mindset is, I don't know what other people are going through, and if they've behaved in a certain way, it's probably a need, an unexpressed need. Now, that unexpressed need doesn't mean it comes without impact. So, it is a series of mindsets and a series of behaviors that I've experimented with in little ways and big ways over time, and I've never had it come back and bite me in the [inaudible 00:20:11].

Marsha Acker: Do you know one of the experiences I'm having as I sit here and listen to you and you talk about generosity, is it just... So, it resonates for me at a really deep core, but it feels good to hear someone else speak like that. So, that's just me in a reflection of what I'm hearing.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: What about that feels good for you?

Marsha Acker: It lowers anxiety, it lowers stress. I like to say I don't look at things as competition. I think I experience running across people sometimes where I get a bit of that vibe. And so, I don't know, it's just lovely. It lands really in a deep resonant way for me.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: I'm really glad to hear that. I experience you as incredibly generous. That, for me, it makes a relationship so easy. So, I even think about when you reached out to me about this, and I have a feeling that my email said, whatever you're asking, the answer is yes and we'll work out the details. I love having relationships with people like you where we have built it up over time and the answer is just yes. I've sort of run my business like that and hopefully run my life like that in a way that does allow me to protect my boundaries, and then the hope that they will pay it forward.

Marsha Acker: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's lovely. Because I'm thinking about listeners who might be working in organizations or leading a team or leading the organization. What would you say to them if they felt some tension between generosity and scarcity? What's some advice you'd give to them inside that context?

Deborah Grayson Riegel: Yeah, so I want to go back to the fundamental belief that we behave in ways that serve us, even if they cost us. I want to acknowledge that that belief around scarcity is coming from something, and that is something that is of value and it's something that has probably helped this person get to where they are now. It may not help them get to the next place, but to actually unpack it and... In the same way that I was like, oh, right when I was 15, I said I'm stuck and I never want to feel that way again. Where does that come from? And then to look and say, is this situation that I'm in now with my team or organization, is it exactly identical to where I learn to behave that way? And where could I run some experiments?

So, I think that's a... All I do is run experiments. Every single day, I run experiments, and then I have to look at the feedback because that's part of the experiment. So, run an experiment that would be like, what would it be like if I acted as if X resource, whatever it is, were abundant? What could I think that would help me get there? And what could I do to test it out? And do it in a place where the stakes are low, but the data are valuable.

Marsha Acker: Yeah, that's lovely. Love it.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: Yeah.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. And I love the idea of running experiments. I don't have to launch the thing. I just have to launch an experiment.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: An experiment, right? And be willing to look at the feedback. I think about one of the experiments that I ran during the pandemic, including the experiment of working in sweatpants, which has proven to be a great experiment... I work better in sweatpants [inaudible 00:23:45]. But I was thinking about before the pandemic, much of what I was talking about in writing about were about feedback, about presentation skills, those sorts of things, and I published a lot of articles. And it was really interesting to see, in the pandemic, all of a sudden, nobody cared anymore, right? Nobody was thinking about feedback. Nobody was thinking about presentation skills. Those were sort of way too high on Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

So, I started writing about mental wellbeing. Having written a book about it, I was like, this isn't something that I talk a lot about. Maybe I should. And all of a sudden, the world said, "Yes, more please, more please, more please." And so now, two and a half years later, the number one thing that I'm asked to talk about is how to talk about mental health at work. It is leadership communication. It's just different. And I only know that from experiments.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. Well, and it's certainly such a prevalent conversation today. I love that it's come forward so much more. And having been connected to you, I think you're part of the reason that conversation is coming forward. Yeah, that's lovely. So, Deb, I end every podcast with a speed round of questions.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: Okay.

Marsha Acker: Which is just to... I'm going to make a statement and you'll just fill in the sentence with whatever comes to mind first.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: Okay. I'm saying to myself, keep it clean, keep it clean.

Marsha Acker: Keep it clean. This is improv, right?

Deborah Grayson Riegel: That's the New Yorker in me going, "Simmer down. Now, you live in North Carolina."

Marsha Acker: Awesome. All right. Leadership is-

Deborah Grayson Riegel: Human.

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

Deborah Grayson Riegel: You are worthy of love.

Marsha Acker: One thing people sometimes get wrong about me is-

Deborah Grayson Riegel: That I love to be in large groups and parties when I would much rather just be home with my dog.

Marsha Acker: Something that brings me joy.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: Ice cream.

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

Deborah Grayson Riegel: Generous.

Marsha Acker: I feel like that's a mic dropped, so maybe we just stopped there.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: Fair enough. And I didn't curse once.

Marsha Acker: That didn't, not once.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: [inaudible 00:26:05] while we're ahead.

Marsha Acker: So, if we keep going, then it might really get spicy.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: That's right. That's right.

Marsha Acker: That's awesome. Deb, thank you so much for coming on and having the conversation with me. And I really appreciate and love your theme around generosity and how you model it. It's just awesome.

Deborah Grayson Riegel: Thank you, Marsha.

Marsha Acker: I hope you enjoyed my conversation with Deborah. What I really appreciate about where our conversation took us is this concept about our behavior. We do what we do for a reason. We've learned it in our past, our childhood stories, and the narratives that we tell ourselves about what's happened in our past sit underneath all of our behavior. Deb described this process of catching sight of this visceral reaction she had to feeling trapped in her parents' divorce and how she had recently been able to link that to her behavior of generating more business than she could possibly do all on her own. I really love what Deb said about the work of a leader is doing the work to make sense of ourselves and the impact we're having on others and choosing more effective paths, and I couldn't agree more. I think our work as leaders is to be willing to look at it and not to see it, and then keep putting it aside.

And I can speak from my own experience. There are times where I don't know that I really want to look at it, and the process of looking at it has been so revealing, clarifying, lightening the load kind of things. So, I find there's so much gifts when we're willing to take a look. So, I find Deb also just really inspiring. Everything that she says about generosity is absolutely how I experience her. But I left this conversation really asking myself, where can I be more generous in my life? And I'd invite you to ask the same question or explore the same question. And maybe it's where might you be more generous, or where are you on the generosity to scarcity scale or continuum? And what's the story that sits behind your generosity or scarcity? What has you behaved that way? I think that we behave in ways, even if it costs us, and the narrative that sits underneath of that, where it comes from and exploring why we behave the way we do.

And if you're interested in exploring your own behavior more deeply and how it impacts your ability to lead yourself and others, I would love to personally invite you to come join us in an upcoming workshop. It's called Changing Behavior in High Stakes. You can read about it at teamcatapult.com/workshop. We explore how leaders can intervene in high stakes in order to change the nature of the outcome, and we go squarely at this concept of behavior, what it's like to work with behavior, see your own behavior and see what happens for us, and actually where our stories really do come out when we get into high stakes. And of all the transformational learning and coaching work that we do, this program has quickly become one of my most favorite to lead. So, I would love for you to join us, and if you want to know more, you can even drop me an email.

Okay. 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. You can find the link to Deborah's social media, and you can also find her at deborahgraysonriegel.com. You'll find all those links in the show notes on teamcatapult.com/podcast. So, until next time, keep growing your leadership range and defining your own model for leadership. And I'll see you then.