



Defining Moments of Leadership with Marsha Acker and Monica Manning on Breaking the Silence and Working with Difference



Marsha Acker:

Hi, everyone. I'm Marsha Acker, and this is Defining Moments of Leadership. Today, we are continuing our miniseries on model building here on the podcast with each episode highlighting a leader who's done their own work around building their model for leadership and leading change. My hope is that by hearing others talk about their model, you'll be inspired to define yours. My guest today is Monica Manning, and I am blown away by the work that Monica's doing around social justice and helping people find their voice and the role that dialogue plays in her model for leading change.

You'll also hear her talk about the importance of difference in being able to work with difference rather than allowing the difference to divide us or drive us into silos. As you listen to Monica today, just make some notes of what's in her model. What does she believe about how change happens and how does that inform what she does when working with others? Let me introduce you to Monica. Monica Manning is a Dialogue and Leadership Facilitator. She works in Dublin, Ireland for social justice NGO called Community Action Network.

She is an experienced dialogue facilitator and has a strong commitment to promoting and supporting leadership development in service of social justice. Having started her career in youth work, she has over 30 years of experience in supporting individuals and groups to fulfill their leadership potential. She has designed and delivered several leadership programs for senior leaders working in the nonprofit sector. She is currently leading and facilitating a dialogue process between young people and the police in an inner city community to address longstanding difficulties in their relationships.

She uses action research and inquiry to support elder activists and others in responding to social issues which concern them. Her work frequently involves bringing people together from very different backgrounds and mindsets to

collaborate on finding solutions to complex problems. Monica holds a master's of science and responsibility and business practice from Bath University, an action research degree focused primarily on sustainability and change issues. She is an accredited dialogue facilitator and change interventionist with Kantor Institute in Boston and Dialogix in the UK. Let's dive in. Welcome to the podcast. Today, I am delighted to have Monica Manning with me.

Monica Manning: Hi, Marsha.

Marsha Acker: We're in the process of doing this miniseries about building your model for leading change, and I have really wanted to bring forward leaders who have done some work in model building. I know you've been doing this for years. I'm really excited to have you tell your story today just not only about model building, but also what you do and how you're applying it.

Monica Manning: Where do I start? I suppose first by introducing myself maybe. I'm Monica. I work for a social justice NGO based in Dublin in Ireland, and we're called Community Action Network. My work is primarily facilitating dialogue and leadership development, but within a social justice context. Our strapline, CAN's strapline is placing people at the heart of change, and the people we're talking about are people who experience poverty, exclusion, marginalized, people who are disenfranchised in some way, and I suppose also the people who work with people who are disenfranchised.

That brings in a lot of the leadership development as well that I do. The change we're talking about is not neutral at all. It's very much about a real desire for justice, for social justice, acknowledging that we don't live in an equal society. We're not neutral. We're upfront. It's steeped in values. In terms of my leadership, it really challenges me to keep close to the values that drive me in those values.

Marsha Acker: As I hear you describe that, one of the things that occurs to me is that's not small, easy change.

Monica Manning: Absolutely not. Oh, it is very slow. It is one step forward, two step backwards so often. It's never done alone. It's always in relation and in relationship. It is always collaboration.

Marsha Acker: I'm starting to hear pieces of what I make up to be your model about change. You've just said it's never done alone; it's done in partnership. We're really upfront. We're not neutral. Are there other principles that shape and inform how you work on a really complex and important topic?

Monica Manning: I've been thinking about it before we met, and I think a theme that is really central, it is about breaking silence. It has been an ongoing theme, but it is no coincidence that I have spent my entire life working with people who have also been silenced. A core principle in our model. I say our model because it's so

much part... I'm so part of CAN and CAN is so part of me, but it is such a core is breaking the silence. That means different things in different places. But when we talk about breaking the silence for people who experience poverty, who experience disadvantage, there can be a huge sense of shame about that.

There can be a real sense of guilt that maybe I've done something wrong, or this is my fault. You know the Brené Brown stuff on silence, it absolutely flourishes in the dark. Being able to cast a light on that. It is always a really big part of the starting point and creating safe spaces for people to be able to share that, to start to give voice to that. When individuals start to have an opportunity to give voice, something gets released. It is amazing and they start to see the patterns and start to be able to say, "How come you experienced this as well? Maybe there's something else going on here that's not all about me." It gives a courage, and then we follow that with analysis.

But if I was to just stay with the silence and the theme of silence for a second, I think the other thing that for me that has been very liberating is breaking the silence about my privilege, because I think that silenced to me in this work as well. It can often silence people who are working in service of social change, and it can manifest in different ways in terms of even colluding with stuff that you know isn't great or it being afraid of being patronizing, or even worse, minimizing your privilege and almost saying it's not there, it doesn't matter. It's complex. Privilege and disadvantage and silence, all that stuff it is complex.

Marsha Acker: The theme of silence is really resonating with me because I certainly can identify with it. I think there's a part even for myself where I have found myself go silent in that space and privilege is a big part of that. This place of you say looking at breaking silence, looking at what silences you, and then you talked about creating some safe spaces. What do you do? Can you give us a sense of maybe one or two things that you do that helps to create that environment for people?

Monica Manning: It's about reaching out. It's about inviting individuals into that space, creating that space where... That's where dialogue has been so, so helpful and dialogue practices. The whole sense of creating a container that can really be safe. If we are all practicing being able to speak from our authentic voice and our authentic voice is quite different from that voice that we speak from most of the time. Authentic voice is being able to say what it is I really need to say as opposed to what I think I ought to say or what I think my role requires me to say or what I think nearly say out of me.

It's a different voice. And to create that space, you need to have a sense that there's going to be confidentiality. I'm not going to be judged. I'm not going to be quoted. Sometimes they can seem like basic things, but they're not basic. Because if they're not done, it's the difference.

Marsha Acker: Just for those who are listening who might be wondering what you mean when you say practices of dialogue, how do you define those?

Monica Manning: I often say the practices of dialogue are very simple, but not easy. They are practices. They're lifelong practices as well. The first one is the voice, finding my authentic voice, which I just referred to. It's that voice. It's about listening, but listening really deeply, listening to understand. I also think it's about listening to your own internal reactions and things. It's listening to that, but also turning it down, but tuning into it. There's loads of paradoxes in some of what we're saying, but it is that listening to really deeply listen to the other person, listen to body language, listen to what's not being said. It's really deep listening.

The third one is suspend our certainty. Again, I often say particularly to leaders who need to be experts, who have that sense that I need to be seen to know what I'm talking about, dialogue is a place where you welcome your ignorance. Listen to understand, suspend your certainty, and just be curious. But it's also suspending our judgment. Because again, the thing that I have found really helpful about that is, first of all, acknowledge we're all judgmental. It's human. But invariably, those of us who are judgmental are probably most critical of ourselves because it's the other side of the judgment is the [inaudible 00:11:22]. Suspending that is such a welcome invitation.

Then the fourth practice is respect, and respect is not about liking and just being nice. It's very active. It's about, first of all, respecting my own right to speak and my own views, but in turn also really respecting the other. That's where when we're bringing people from different perspectives with different views, the respect is so important, really allowing the other person to speak their difference and to respect their right to have that difference. Not to agree with them, just respect their right. They're the four practices. I suppose they are really core to all my leadership, but really core to dialogue practice.

Marsha Acker: I appreciate what you said about simple and not easy. One of the things that occurs to me, as you talk about the four practices, I think there's no lack of opportunity, where in my viewpoint we are really missing some of those dialogue practices just in our global conversations, our organizational conversations. I think one of the things that stands out for me, both in the US but even on a global level, is that we are in a time where we feel like we've lost the ability to be in conversation with one another and suspend and listen and respect. I don't know about you, but I certainly crave a day where we can get back to more of that rather than less than.

Monica Manning: Oh, totally. Absolutely. I think we have become so polarized globally. It's everywhere. It absolutely is everywhere. It's in Otto Scharmer, the Four Fields of Conversation that he talks about, and just that place of debate, othering. I'm right, you are wrong. Stay with people that you like. Just don't listen to anybody. It's all of that stuff, and I'm so tired of it. I have such a desire. I suppose that's what drives me a bit is to try and create spaces where we can just drop that and maybe admit that none of us have all the answer. We all might have a little bit of it, but we don't. Yeah, I so agree with you.

Marsha Acker: I love that framing. How does it show up in your work? How does the divisiveness show up? And then how do you work with it?

Monica Manning: I suppose in the charity sector, social justice sector, I think it can show up... Well, first of all, it shows up in that there's still so much poverty and so many things. People's lives haven't improved in some communities. That divide is getting greater. Just at a really macro level, the inequalities are there. But just in my day-to-day work and how it shows up, I think it's the pull... I'm going to come back to that notion of collaboration because I think that really helps me.

That so often I think people and individuals, but in groupings and all are pulled to work with people that they like and who'll agree with them. There's a comfort in that. I just love Adam Kahane's work around saying we have to collaborate with the enemy. I know collaboration with the enemy, it's heavy language and it's sounds big, but actually what he's saying is we have to work with people we don't like, we don't trust, and we don't really rate.

That shows up for me in terms of say different communities within communities, right down to different people from different streets don't like others from another street. But it shows up in organizations big time and in services. When the same organizations are going after the same funding or the funding streams, the competing, they're vying with one another. I mean, we often talk about the poverty industry nearly where there's so much depending on targets and a bunch of...

It's that kind of stuff. It shows up in very ideological ways as well where people who are driven by very strong values, but they can think, "Well, my way is the right way. It's almost like my values are so pure, I'm not going to be deviated all from them." Some of the most transient stuff at times I have actually experienced are for people who are coming from really strong moral, ethical base. It's almost like they hold it so tightly that there can be an intolerance of others. That's kind of where it shows up.

Marsha Acker: Yeah, I can totally see that. I'm wondering if you could give us an example of a snippet of the work that you've done. I'm sitting here and I'm imagining maybe I'm a listener going, "Wow, these are really big topics. It sounds like you're up to your really big work." How do you go about living out your vision and mission and what does that look like in the room?

Monica Manning: I mean, it works in loads, and I'm lucky that I get to work in different areas. In community, for example, typically... I say at the moment a lot of my work is in an inner city community where there's a very long tradition of poor relationships between young people and the police. The work that I've been doing over the last couple of years is working with a group of young people, a group of youth workers, and a number of police, we call them guardy here, but police working on trying to improve relationships between the young people and the police. That means typically bringing young people who don't trust, and there've been experiences in the past that have led to that lack of trust.

Marsha Acker: Good reason.

Monica Manning: It's good reason. But equally, there's people in the police who really have had bad experiences as well, but also can come into that community with a lot of prejudice. There's a lot of stigma attached to that community at times. They're coming in with some of that. And then you also have the youth workers who are really important players in it and who can typically be torn with a foot on both camps. The work we've been doing there is creating spaces for each of those individually to talk about their experience and to be able to do that in a way that, again, in all those safety things.

Because there's a lot of fear and there has been a lot of fear if young people are seen to be... Language that's used is like, "You're a rat. You're snake," you don't do that. It's heavy. It's heavy stuff. In the same way with the guards, with the police, they can be even judged by their colleagues. That's an area. That has been an area where we've been really building that trust, building the leadership so that there's really...

There's been some amazing conversations where a young 15-year-old boy can talk about his sense of shame at being stopped and searched every time he walks out of his community, and being able to ask a senior police officer, "Why is that? Why do you judge me?" For those conversations to really happen and insight. That's something that there's been lovely things coming out. It's slow, Marsha. It is so slow. It's making good grants.

Marsha Acker: I was going to say, what is the outcome that you see from some of those conversations? Let's just step back for a moment. I mean, you're bringing different players into the room. You're living into one of those values that I just heard you articulate of people being in the same room who actually might view the other as the enemy or someone to be avoided or they have quite a bit of judgment against. I'm just wondering what you observed. I hear you about the slowness, but I'm wondering what you observed about the outcome of some of those dialogues.

Monica Manning: I suppose there's something that when I get to know you and you get to know me, when I have seen you and you've seen me, it's you can't not see me again. Just seeing the lovely relationships, those small interactions. There was one particular incident where there was a really high profile event in the community. There was a thing that kicked off. It was very high stakes. There was a lot of potential for trouble between the community and the police. One of the officers who had been sitting in dialogue, who was a senior officer, went down to oversee the policing of it. Next thing he saw one of the young guys who had been in the dialogue.

He said hi and gave him a thing, but the young fella came over and said hi and used his first name. The officer said, "Lucas, is there any way you can get some of those guys to move away? This has the potential to be really bad." Yeah, no problem. I'll have a thing. He went back, he had a word and dispersed. That was

just a small thing, but the impact on the officer. He came away. He said, "That was just an amazing." He was so touched. Some of the youth workers talk about being able to pick up the phone and know an individual and say, "Can we take this offsite here and have a chat? Is there a way we could sort?"

So much of what we need to do needs to be done quietly, that it's often stuff that is hard to be... You can't really promote it in some ways because it needs to be low-key, but yet it's very powerful.

Marsha Acker: Let's talk about model building because we've keep pointing to it. How did you come to the process of model building?

Monica Manning: Well, I came through it all through my work with Sarah Hill in Dialogix. The work of David Kantor has just been a gift. It was absolutely a gift that I was ready for and came at such a good time in my life. The whole idea of dialogic leadership has been a very helpful container for me to focus on my model building. I came to it, first of all, through my work in dialogue, then structural dynamics, which you're obviously very familiar with, and has been such a powerful life changing. It's more than a tool, it's a life practice.

Marsha Acker: You've said it's life changing. What was life changing about it? How has it shifted?

Monica Manning: I start by focusing on what silenced me. That was a huge barrier to my own leadership. Working on childhood story was life changing. Having a language, having a tool like this, I love the idea of the structural conversation as opposed to the moral conversation. Everything about it has been so helpful. Everything about my leadership is so close to my values. It's very hard for me to differentiate between the professional me and the me because they're so intertwined.

Marsha Acker: We've done a little bit of pulling out some of the pieces that I hear in your model. Is there anything else that stands out for you that is in your model for leading change?

Monica Manning: Mindfulness is such a really big part of my model as well. It's all about relationship change, but working from a whole systems approach, really believing that if you bring that system, if you bring a slice of the system together, you bring the different players together with an intention and working with that. I think model building gives and has given me the opportunity to take what works for me and adapt it, constrain it, push back, and then do my own bit. That's what I do with other leaders. I get such a kick out of seeing people go off with a little bit of what I have and making their own and just blossoming and growing.

Marsha Acker: You're pointing to that autonomy place in David's theory about... He talks about that imitation, imitating something else and then starting to constrain it or push

back. Monica, imagine that there's at least one leader listening to us right now who's going, "I don't know, or I'm not sure, or what is this," what's some advice you would give to them about getting started? Why get started?

Monica Manning: Well, the first thing I'd say is you already have one. You have a model. You're working from model. Why not find a language first? Why not find little bit more to be able to look at it, refine it, and be able to articulate it? Because I think it will help you walk the talk as opposed to just talking the talk. It's a really helpful way to look at what am I saying I do and am I doing it? The beauty about that is you can do that with yourself. I think we learn more when we have peers and learning partners and learning communities. But as a starting point, it can be really a safe place even to step in and just start on your own. I think you already are doing it, so why not just find a way to articulate it.

Marsha Acker: I love that. Monica, thank you so much for talking with me today about some of your experience. I end every podcast with a speed round of questions.

Monica Manning: Oh yeah.

Marsha Acker: I gave you a heads-up this morning, but you don't actually know what questions are coming. Are you ready to do it?

Monica Manning: Of course. Yeah, go for it. Yeah.

Marsha Acker: Perfect. Okay, here we go. Leading change is?

Monica Manning: It's always in service. For me, it's always in service of social justice.

Marsha Acker: One thing people get wrong about change is?

Monica Manning: That it's easy. No, maybe that it's difficult. That's the thing maybe they get actually, because it's automatically assumed that they're... And sometimes it's easy. Actually, no. Can I change that?

Marsha Acker: Yes, you can. Perfect. One thing you wish for leaders today?

Monica Manning: Well, for kindness, kindness, kindness and compassion. I just want that for everybody, but really for leaders because I think it's a hard place out there. Just be kind to yourself and be kind to others.

Marsha Acker: Lovely. A moment where having a model for change has helped you.

Monica Manning: Well, here.

Marsha Acker: How is it...

Monica Manning: When I was asked to do this podcast, there's no way I would've done this before. Just by being able to know that actually I do have a model. Yes, this model, it means a lot to me. It's something I'm quite happy to share. Here, Marsha, that's obvious.

Marsha Acker: Monica, that's awesome. I really appreciate you coming today and sharing your model, and I love the work that you're doing. If people want to get in touch with you, if they're curious about you or about the work that your organization does, what's the best way for them to do that?

Monica Manning: Well, our website. We're really trying to push ourselves on social media and we're not great, but we do have a website, www.canaction.ie. I'd love to hear from people, and my email is on that.

Marsha Acker: We'll put a link in the show notes on our website so people can easily find you. Monica, thank you so much.

Monica Manning: Thank you, Marsha. I've really enjoyed it. I really am looking forward to your book. I just think it's going to be such a resource. Thank you.

Marsha Acker: I hope you enjoyed this conversation with Monica. I found our conversation to be so thought-provoking. I think I could have just listened to her for hours tell the stories and examples that she shares about the power of dialogic leadership and how using dialogue as a way to invite all voices is creating change. Even though it might feel like small increments in big social issues, they're really powerful examples of how the small differences and the small behavior changes can make a difference. You might want to grab a sticky note and write this down because I think it's worth remembering. Monica said, when I have seen you and you've seen me, you cannot not see me again.

When I have seen you and you've seen me, you cannot not see me again. That sits at the very core of how I think change happens when we're able to embrace difference and break the silence to really bring all voices into the space. It's such a powerful reminder of the impact of inquiry into others. I think change happens when we're able to bridge the divide, to embrace the difference, to seek to understand it, to voice what's true for us to find our voice, but to also find someone else's voice. If you're listening today and finding it difficult to talk or work with someone, look, and we all have them, I want you to just take a moment to reflect on, what is the difference?

How might you be thinking or seeing things differently? And what would it look like to inquire into their experience, like really inquire into it? Look, we need difference. It is the source of new thinking. But what can happen is we can often go silent or shut down or we minimize difference or we make it not as important or valuable. I think about the power of a phrase, what we can't be with will run the show. How do you learn to make space to expand your tolerance for difference, to expand your ability to be with difference and inquire

into it? Change happens in small interactions and in small ways, and we have to work with people we don't like.

I think they can be our greatest teachers. I know that has certainly been the case for me. One of the other things that Monica said that I think is so important is you already have a model, but not being able to articulate it is where we get stuck in our interactions with others. If you're ready to dive into model building and model building for you around leading change, head over to buildyourmodel.com and buy the book. It's a full color guided workbook designed to sit alongside you as you're defining your own model for leading change. When you get it, your job is to crack it open, break the spine, grab your most favorite pen or marker and get started.

You have to write in it. If you're ready to develop true competency in making behavioral change happen using structural dynamics, we offer public programs for coaches and private programs for leaders and leadership teams. You can reach out to us at info@teamcatapult.com to schedule a call. You'll find information about all these links, also Monica's contact information, as well as the link to the Community Action Network at teamcatapult.com/podcast. You can find the show notes. I really appreciate you being here. Keep growing your leadership range and defining your own model for leadership and change, and I'll see you next time.