



Defining Moments of Leadership with Marsha Acker and Glenn Sigl on Embracing Difference



Marsha Acker:

Hi everyone, I'm Marsha Acker and this is Defining Moments of Leadership. Our miniseries on model building continues here on the podcast today, and my guest is Glenn Sigl and we are exploring a key aspect of his leadership model around embracing difference and how it's a key theme for him. And in this example of where he's taken David Kantor's model around tolerating differences and reframed the language. It's such a key aspect of model building and defining your version of leadership.

So before we dive in, let me introduce you to Glenn. Glenn is a senior director of human resources for a Fortune 500 real estate investment trust in the multi-family housing space. He has over 25 years of HR OD consulting experience. He actively uses structural dynamics in his own leadership and is developing leaders within his organization. He obtained his master's and doctorate degrees in leadership in organizational psychology from William James College in Boston. And while at William James, he discovered structural dynamics and began actively model building as a part of graduate studies. He wrote his dissertation on the potential relationship between the level three structural dynamics, operating systems and complexity leadership theory. Glenn was born in New Orleans, Louisiana and has lived in many places. Atlanta, Miami, DC and now Boston. He's been married to John Self, his favorite human for 30 years. He loves classical music, opera, theater, skiing, jogging, working out, traveling, reading, and lifelong learning. Let's dive in.

Hi Glenn, I am so excited to have you on the podcast today. So welcome.

Glenn Sigl:

Marsha, what a pleasure and an honor to be here. Thank you for having me.

Marsha Acker: Yeah, thanks. So a little bit of background about who you are and what you do. So you're the Senior Director for HR Business Partners with a real estate investment trust here in the US. What does that mean for you on a daily basis?

Glenn Sigl: Well, I am the strategic advisor for our major markets in the East, so I get to work with leaders at all levels and really looking at our talent and really looking at what can we do as a company to make sure that we are providing a really inclusive and productive environment we're people feel welcomed and appreciated and valued.

Marsha Acker: I love the vision that you laid out just a second ago about an inclusive workplace around leadership. What makes that challenging today?

Glenn Sigl: Well, it makes it challenging because in order to have an inclusive environment, it's this idea about embracing differences. And it's not always easy, especially when we feel, myself included, where I feel like I operate effectively and I can do things in a way that gets results. And yet there are others within the organization that have kind of a very different view about what it takes to be effective and to operate in a way that's successful. And this idea about how do we learn from each other and how do we kind of lean into our curiosity because there's such insights and different perspectives and it's just an ongoing challenge. And yet the results are so worth it when we just slow down a little bit and decide we're going to learn from each other and listen to each other and adapt together.

Marsha Acker: You are pointing right at the heart of, I think for, at least one of the aspects of where we may go in our conversation today, but this is one of the podcasts that we're doing in this miniseries around model building. And one of the reasons that I wanted to talk with you today is that you've done quite a bit of work around model building and also in David Kantor's theory of structural dynamics, which is part of the source of that. And you and I have spent quite a bit of time over the last couple of years connecting around those theories, but one of the things that David put out in the world around structural dynamics is it was a way of what he would say growing your tolerance for difference.

Glenn Sigl: Yeah, I reframe it. To me, tolerance is just merely coexisting with difference. And to me, what it's lacking is compassion and this idea of embracing difference and learning from difference. As leaders, there's just so much available to us when we really say, I want you to be different. I'm not just going to tolerate difference. I'm actually inviting it in.

Marsha Acker: I love what you're doing with David's model of building upon it, incorporating it and creating a bit of autonomy in your own model building process. So you've said, I believe that just looks like coexisting and I'm adding that it's lacking compassion and I love this edition of embracing and learning from, how do I maybe notice the difference, lower the stakes for myself in noticing the difference and begin to create a pathway for myself. But to actually call for it or embrace it or say what can I learn from it? That's a really different place to be.

Glenn Sigl: Yeah, it's not easy. I mean constantly I'm checking in with myself on a daily basis because I'm presented with difference all the time and my go-to is to want to judge it, shut it down, that's not right. And it's kind of almost a mindfulness practice that I have with myself of wow, where in my life and in my work, was I accepting of differences today?

Marsha Acker: Yeah, I think that's so true about, there's so many concepts I think in this world where intellectually we can say, yes, I understand conflict. Yes, I understand difference. Yes, I believe we can espouse. I believe in difference or I believe in being accepting. And then there are those moments that you find yourself in where the stakes rise and you're in the deep end of the pool and you're feeling like you're treading water capability that day or something. So I love what you say about it being a practice. I know that's certainly been true for me as well.

Glenn Sigl: And a part of the practice is the reparative work of when it just didn't go well at all. And that is absolutely a part of my model, which is I own and I see where I got caught up in a moment and I wasn't my best and I maybe wasn't as compassionate, maybe was a bit headstrong. And yet to reflect on it and to go back and to the person and say, you know what, maybe I didn't hear you out, or maybe I came across in a way that was shutting it down instead of opening it up. And it's just so important that we are kind to ourselves as we're doing this work.

Marsha Acker: We've been talking a little bit about some of your model and how it came to be. I'd like to step back and think about, can you tell us a little bit about how you came to this work of model building in the first place? How did you end up thinking about it?

Glenn Sigl: Yeah, so I'm privileged in the fact that I've was able to go forth and get my master's and then later on my doctorate in organizational psychology and leadership psychology. And as a practitioner, this understanding of being really clear with myself about what are those guiding principles, what are those assumptions, how do I view organizations, how do I view leadership, was just really important for me to get clear with the thought of how can we help leaders, other leaders be clear about their model and what their assumptions are, is just this idea of I had to start with myself first. And I had to really understand what lens I was viewing the world and how I was viewing leadership and organizations so that I can help leaders to be able to do it for themselves.

Marsha Acker: How did you get started in building your own model? Was there one or two principles that stood out for you as you were asking yourself about those guiding principles?

Glenn Sigl: Yeah, I mean I had the opportunity to study many different theories as a part of my graduate work and quickly learned where I had my aha moments around certain models or theories. I said, "Oh, that makes sense. That is so helpful. It helps me to be able to view the organization through that lens." And as you mentioned in your book, this idea of, okay, well how do we take in these models? But then how do we pick? We go through somewhat of an intentional

process of we're attracted to certain models, we're attracted to certain theories about leadership and about organizations. And then there are some that just don't land with us or we don't feel connected to them.

And so this idea of how do we from an intake perspective and then the constrained perspective of choosing and then revising. So this idea of, okay, I believe this theory, but in the end I'm a pragmatist. I want to know what does this really mean in the real world? And so in structural dynamics, I'm high in power, so I'm very much like, okay, how does one take action on this knowledge? How do we see it play out? And then integrating it. I can now see between different theories that I hold in my model, I can draw a line, I can actually do, I have this kind of big whiteboard, I can show you where the theories connect to be something that's kind of a comprehensive. It's been wonderful and challenging.

Marsha Acker: I love this.

Glenn Sigl: And I'm not done. I mean model building is life. I think it's just an ongoing process.

Marsha Acker: I love this idea that you're pointing to of we'll run across theories that really ring our bells, there's resonance. And then there's those that we resist or sort of discard. Can you remember way back in the way back machine, a theory that you easily incorporated? Like it resonated for you?

Glenn Sigl: Well, structural dynamics. So that one, I learned a tremendous amount about myself just going through the process of determining my profile and where my propensities are. And armed with that, it led me to other theories that I was able to see connecting points to.

Marsha Acker: What resonated the most for you with structural dynamics?

Glenn Sigl: Oh, where do I begin? Where do I begin? So move, follow, oppose, bystand, so easy, easily teachable to others. And then I learned I was a stuck follower, so I'm a stuck follow.

Marsha Acker: And for anybody who might be new to structural dynamics language, what Glenn and I are talking about is that first level of probably the more visible of actions in the room. And so you've just heard him name move, follow, oppose, and bystand, but you're saying you're a stuck follower.

Glenn Sigl: I'm a stuck follower and I'm low in oppose. And I will never forget when I was being coached on learning about my profile, my coach said like, "Oh my God, are you getting your needs met?" Because I was so ingrained, my default was to support others, to make sure that when other people had wishes or desires, that my first and my default stuck was to not oppose, but to accommodate. And how I just saw just in that simple level one where I can see where I had a story

behind that, being able to understand why that was my default. And then what structural dynamics teaches us is that we don't stay there. So I've since then learned to have a new relationship with the opposed action.

Marsha Acker: And what's your relationship now?

Glenn Sigl: What's my relationship now is I welcome opposing actions. So I will be in a group and we'll be talking about an idea and someone will say, "I don't know, I think I feel differently. I really see it as this." And I'll just like, "Thank you, thank you for that oppose." And my mission is really to not just normalize the oppose, but to welcome it. And also to find comfort level in my oppose. Because in reading the room, David Kantor talks about what action is missing, and if there's no one who is opposing, I'm going to be thinking about, well, how do either I step into that action? How do I be the voice of opposition? More times than not, I'm inviting that viewpoint into the room.

Marsha Acker: I love that example. So back to your theories of looking at the lens of the world that you're being introduced to. I'm curious if there's a theory that you resisted, one that you were like, no way?

Glenn Sigl: Yeah. Can it be a theory that I resisted strongly and then I actually incorporated it into my model?

Marsha Acker: I think there's even more data in that.

Glenn Sigl: Yeah. So the name of the theory is Complexity Leadership Theory. And what it espouses is that simply put, organizations can't control, truly control what's happening within it, that there's a formal governance of an organization, and yet there's all this informal interaction where ideas happen, things percolate, self-organization, groups kind of form together to mobilize their energy around certain problems or initiatives. And I just said, "Oh my gosh, I don't want to believe in organizations that you can't. Because I have a closed system vent." And this idea that, well, what do you mean you can't control anything in organizations? And it really scared the heck out of me and felt like it really challenged some core assumptions that I had about human systems and the way they operate.

But I will tell you, learning about Complexity Leadership Theory helped me to make sense of the pandemic. When I was able to observe and see through this lens, local municipalities self-organizing to respond to the pandemic and how that later got picked up with some other municipalities learned from other municipalities, and how this emergent strategy to respond to the pandemic helped me to make sense of it. And to kind of see the power of human systems really trying in extraordinary circumstance, come together and self-organize in ways for safety and the health of its constituents. It was pretty powerful. It got me through the pandemic, I'm telling you.

Marsha Acker: And so you've incorporated that today.

Glenn Sigl: Yeah. And I went on to write my dissertation about it. That's how much I fell in love with it. But I had to sit with it for a moment and I had to say what really scares me about this theory? And upon self-reflection, I just learned that it was kind of making peace with a truth of something that maybe I learned or I'm not sure how I was imparted certain this kind of control command type of environment.

Marsha Acker: I would just love to almost hit pause in our conversation for a moment because I think your example is bringing to light so many of the things that we talk about in this dance between both your behavioral model, so what do you know about how you behave and having a way of making sense of that for yourself. And we're using structural dynamics today in our conversation, but also balancing that against other theories of leadership or orgs or change or models that exist out in the world. And I think that anytime, so we're back to this conversation on difference. Anytime that we notice, we start to categorize things of useful, not useful, I like it so I'm just really appreciating how that one example both blends that behavioral model and then the other leadership models. I think that happens even in feedback that we get in organizations where one leader, be it a boss or a peer or a colleague, gives you feedback about something that you've done. I think that's always most often from their behavioral lens. I'm curious if you've run across that in your organization.

Glenn Sigl: All the time. All the time. And when we talk about feedback in general, I mean there's some schools of thought that just says, and it's true. I mean, feedback is a gift and you decide whether or not you want to take the gift or not. And I like to take it a step further because I've learned that I know as part of my model, what's the 2% truth in the feedback? It doesn't have to be 100% true, but what can be learned? What can be learned from that feedback? And I coach leaders on this all the time because it's not about dismissing things out of hand. It is how might this be true? In what way might this be true? Or could it be a little bit true? Just so that there can just be this open and receptivity to always wanting that feedback.

You don't have to agree with it, but there might be, oh, there's one piece that I just kind of feel is helpful is just so important, I think to create a safe ... For an environment for feedback to truly happen, this idea in my mind that we really listen into the feedback for how might this be helpful? How might this be pointing me into a direction that is going to help me be successful as a leader or otherwise.

Marsha Acker: I'm curious about, so I know you work with leaders inside your organization. Do you also work with them on model building?

Glenn Sigl: I don't think I've used the term model building with them. I will just say the leaders that I'm fortunate to work with are very, very open to self-reflection. And then of course, I believe, especially within my industry, because it can be a

bit of a high stakes industry that really understanding yourself and understand what are those spaces that you're at your best, and then what are those spaces where you know you're going to lose your mind. And just to be able to understand what is it about, what's being called forth in you, what's happening in those high stakes moments? And have been really fortunate that first of all, this whole idea about high stakes has been welcomed and appreciated in the ...

It's like, oh, there's a name for when I'm losing my mind and it's called [inaudible 00:20:23] stakes, or there's a name for when I show up in a way that I am not always so proud of in moment. There's a name for it. And so being able to just call a thing a thing, that high stakes, natural and normal. In fact, I think Marsha, you and I'd agree that leadership is can be a high stakes endeavor. When you're ever in a position of leadership, it can create high stakes.

Marsha Acker: You do quite a bit of organizational work as well around structural dynamics. Somebody asked me the other day, "What's a comparable model to structural dynamics?" And I said, "I don't know that I could name one." How would you answer that question?

Glenn Sigl: I don't know that I could name a model that is as intricate as structural dynamics because of the levels, like the action propensities. And then you go a little bit deeper with the communication domains, affect power meaning, and then you go a bit deeper, more unconscious with the operating systems. And this idea about choice, about where we develop leaders to just really be intentional, deliberate, and to choose how they respond in certain situations.

Marsha Acker: One of the things that I value, I think the most about structural dynamics is its moral neutrality in that there's so many models out there that have, this is what we're aiming for. We often say here that if we can't name it, then we can't be aware of it and we can't work with it. And so without having the ability to name something in a morally neutral way, we're sort of left a little bit floundering in this building awareness. And I think awareness is what brings choice, that intentionality, and then we can make change, but without the awareness, we're sort of lacking that first step.

Glenn Sigl: Yeah, I love that. And not only is structural dynamics in my mind just the moral neutrality. For me, it's a place of invitation. So I know that I am high in power, love, action, and I'm high in affect, and I want to really pay attention to trusting warm relationships and teamwork.

Marsha Acker: So this is often another question that I find comes up around this work, and that's for any organization that starts to look at their own leadership development and says, "Oh, we've done some work. We know that this is sort of a pattern in our organization around structural dynamics. How might we use this to hire in our hiring process?" So what's your response to that?

Glenn Sigl: I am not a fan using assessments unless that they are seen as reliable and valid to the job requirements. Now, with that said, what I do believe in is as a part of the hiring process, how do we really understand what leadership development needs might be emerging from that process? And then how do organizations respond with maybe some assessments after the fact as a way of supporting a new leader into the organization and as a way of being able to develop them visually.

Marsha Acker: It's a little bit about how do you help people work with what's there and grow their communicative competence with anybody that they're working with rather than using it as an assessment tool.

Glenn Sigl: And just as another nod to structural dynamics and leadership development, I've gotten in front of a room of about 60 to 70 managers and simply presented the communication domains of affect, power, and meaning. And then David Kantor goes on to say that a leader works at being trilingual, really getting comfortable on each language. And simply being able to have a room full of frontline leaders be able to quickly and easily say, "Oh, I know I'm high in power, oh, I know I'm high in meaning, oh, I know I'm high in affect" as a way of being able to say, how might we given our own propensities towards a certain communication domain, what does that mean to us as leaders about how do we invite in all languages? How do we notice when a language is missing?

Marsha Acker: Well, it goes back to what we can't name, we can't work with. And I think there is so much value to having an organizationally shared language about how you talk about things that feel intangible.

Glenn Sigl: And this idea of this cross model, in conflict, how do we use structural dynamics to determine what might be going on in the clash? "oh, I can now see I'm coming at the conversation through this power lens of we need to do this, need to do that. And you're trying to talk about the impact on people and how important it is to include others."

Marsha Acker: It does help to reframe judgment, I think. I'm curious what you've noticed in your organization as a result of having some of this language.

Glenn Sigl: The biggest difference is that we're able to talk about pretty thorny situations structurally. And so just kind of going back to what we were just talking about, just this shared language just to say, "Hey, wait a minute, before we jump to a conclusion about effective, ineffective, right versus wrong, we're thinking about how are we relating to one another?" This idea of being able to just have a leader come in pretty upset around something that's happened, and to be able to lower the stakes for that leader by being able to say, "Well, let's just poke around. Let's kind of think about where might the difference be? Where might they have been trying to meet you in this one situation and you're just kind of going at it so differently, we're getting lost in the difference instead of understanding?" Where we might be trying to find a way to work together, but

just approaching it differently has really, I believed, been the biggest benefit to our organization.

Marsha Acker: I can see that. I mean, I think in organizations that if we get called in to work in some organizations where conflict is high, I always come back to the sense that somewhere along the way, people lost the ability to stay in conversation with one another. Something happened and the communication shut down or really became blocked in some way. So yeah, when you say that we're able to have some really thorny discussions and conversations and you're able to stick with it, I think there's a great benefit to that for all of us and working with difference. So Glenn, where are you at today in your model building?

Glenn Sigl: Work in progress. I'm at a place right now where I've been living with certain theories or aspects of my model for a good many years now. And quite frankly, instead of taking on new theories or models, really trying to work with the model that I have and refine it a little bit, I'm a person who can kind of get absolute.

Marsha Acker: What do you hope for leaders in the future? If you were to dream really big?

Glenn Sigl: I can tell you what I dream, and then what I'm also noticing is that I think we are at a precipice of truly in society, not just organizations, of understanding how rigidity of perspective can get us into a whole lot of problems. And forget society. I mean, I can see within my own organization about this rigidity about what is truth, and yet I'm so, so thrilled. I'm seeing these emergent leaders, these managers who are getting promoted and who are really just new managers, they're new to management, they're new to leadership formally. And how open, they're the first one to go into self-reflection, they're the first one to then be able to go there and want to learn about themselves and more importantly, learn how they're impacting others.

More so than I've seen in my 20 plus years in human resources where I'm just seeing a population of people who are now starting to see, "Hey, perhaps I work on me first." And how that just becomes this ripple effect because we're doing the work on ourselves, we're inviting other people to do the same. That's my dream is that we continue to continue down this direction where we're really starting to notice about how we've got to be in command of our own ideas and thoughts and assumptions, and then be open to learning from others.

Marsha Acker: Glenn, I think I could probably continue this conversation for another hour. I have so many things that have come up as we've been chatting that I feel like we could dive into, but we'll maybe begin to wrap this up for today and we'll think about ways to continue the exploration. So I end every podcast with a speed round of questions, and so the invitation here is to just say the first thing that comes to mind for you when you hear the statement. So are you ready?

Glenn Sigl: Yeah, let's do it.

Marsha Acker: Okay. Leading change is ...

Glenn Sigl: An ever-evolving process, always unfolding.

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

Glenn Sigl: Is that it has to look a certain way.

Marsha Acker: Nice. One thing you wish for leaders today?

Glenn Sigl: I'm going to go to self-care, compassion. As you learn about yourself and grow as a leader, just know you're not in this alone and it's a well worth it journey. It could be tough at times, but [inaudible 00:30:39].

Marsha Acker: Warning.

Glenn Sigl: Warning, yes.

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

Glenn Sigl: Oh, it has helped me as a practitioner and just to be able to know, it's helped me to have a very mindful approach to how I'm experiencing a certain situation or others, and how that helps me to truly get to being helpful and of service to others, says the stuck follow

Marsha Acker: Nice observation. And then a bystand on yourself.

Glenn Sigl: The bystand on ... Right. True to form. That's for sure.

Marsha Acker: Yeah, there's that awareness again.

Glenn Sigl: Yeah.

Marsha Acker: So helpful. Glenn, thank you so much for being on the show today and being willing to share these aspects of your story.

Glenn Sigl: What a pleasure. Marsha, thank you so much for the invitation to be here today and just really appreciated our time together.

Marsha Acker: Yeah, me too. If people want to get in touch with you, what's the best way for them to do that?

Glenn Sigl: LinkedIn, I guess, would be the best way to be able to reach me, and would love to hear from folks, especially around their own journey around model building.

Marsha Acker: Perfect. So yeah, definitely we'll link to your LinkedIn profile in the show notes and people can find that so fantastic. Glenn, thank you so much.

Glenn Sigl: Thank you, Marsha.

Marsha Acker: Difference is what raises the stakes for us. When we encounter differences, we are in the territory of stakes raising themes and triggers, and if they remain invisible to us and to others, it is the source of what can lead us to our most unhelpful and hurtful behavior in a moment of crisis or pressure. I think it's what makes high stake situations, they can seem like they're spiraling. Glenn and I explored an aspect of his model that includes not just tolerance for difference, but how he embraces difference with compassion and curiosity. And as you listen to Glenn talk about all aspects of his work, you hear this theme of working with difference as a practice come throughout his leadership. And so for him, working with it means welcoming it with compassion, being curious if difference is missing, and seeking it out, reframing his relationship to oppose, embracing it and being grateful for when it's voiced. And this key aspect of taking action to repair a relationship when you encounter difference that didn't go well because it's our natural tendency to judge and we're human.

I think this notion of working with difference is a calling forth for all of us today. I've really appreciated my conversation with Glenn. I've thought about it a lot since we talked. So my question for you today is what does your leadership model say about difference and how do you work with it? I really hope you've found it inspiring in your own model building or something inspiring in your own model building work today. You hear Glenn and I referring to structural dynamics a lot as a guide to navigate difference. If you are ready to learn more, you can download a free excerpt from my new book, *Build Your Model For Leading Change*. The excerpt includes the roadmap for seven junctures of self-awareness to navigate structural dynamics, and you can find it at buildyourmodel.com.

If you're interested in engaging in this kind of leadership development, reach out to us at info@teamcatapult.com. We'd love to have a conversation with you. And if you want to learn more about structural dynamics, we have an open program coming up in May called *Advanced Facilitation*, and we do private programs for leaders and leadership teams. So you can reach out at info@teamcatapult.com to schedule a call. You can find all these links and references at the podcast homepage, which is teamcatapult.com/podcast. I really appreciate you being here. Keep growing your leadership range and defining your own model for leadership, and I'll see you next time.