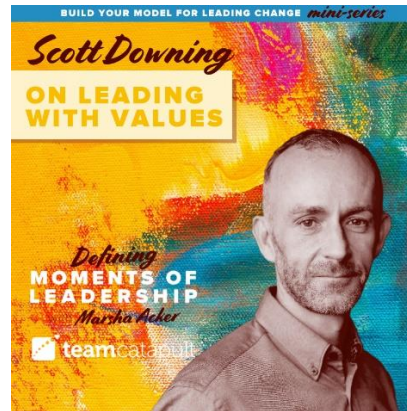




Defining Moments of Leadership with Marsha Acker and Scott Downing on Leading with Values



Marsha Acker:

Hi everyone, I'm Marsha Acker and this is Defining Moments of Leadership. We're continuing our miniseries on model building today and we're exploring personal values and their importance in your leadership. If you've ever been in a situation at work where you experienced resentment, anger, frustration about something that was happening, chances are the situation may have been stepping on a personal value for you.

My guest today is Scott Downing and we're exploring the critical intersection of his model for leadership and his model for living. And I'm so excited to share the story with you. But first, let me introduce you to Scott. Scott Downing is a global employee and customer experience strategist and an advocate for continuous improvement. Scott has experience across software as a service, telco and financial service sectors across multiple regions and countries. Recently, Scott helped a tech unicorn kickoff its CX strategy and transformation program to ensure its success continued. This included building new transformation teams, voice of customer programs, as well as introducing new technology. Scott is originally from the UK and has been in Australia for 15 years now. He is the proud winner of the customer service executive of the year in Australia and internationally. So let's dive in.

Scott, I am so excited to have you on the podcast today, so welcome.

Scott Downing:

Thank you. Thank you for having me. It's great to be here.

Marsha Acker:

We're doing this miniseries in the podcast and focusing on the book Building Your Model for Leading Change. And I asked you to come today because you and I met learning about structural dynamics and model building and I know after we spent some time together you went on and continued to do this work

of model building, both personally and within the organization. And I am really excited today to dive in and explore your experience with model building and how it served you.

Scott Downing: Thank you. It's great to talk to someone who has been through it too

Marsha Acker: Just so people have a little bit of context about you. So your expertise is in the executive space for employee and customer experience strategies. For listeners who might be wondering, what is that? What's that job function like?

Scott Downing: Yeah, it's a really good question, actually, and I'm not sure there is a function that sort of fits it. It sometimes feels like I'm wearing many, many hats, but my background really was in operational management, so leading large scale contact centers and particularly around customer service. So I've got a big background in that in understanding how to transform and optimize that, particularly as the world is changing into digital anomaly channel.

But about... it was about the time we met actually, Marsha. So my role started to become a bit more bespoke into advocacy and customer experience. So when running an operation, how'd you make sure your employees are set up for success to deliver great customer experiences? So now I focus on what I would call the CX craft. So how do we make sure we're building experiences for customers that aren't a cookie-cutter approach to everything, and then how does that manifest in the workplace so that you can build in digital and optimization. The CX and strategy craft and building that and then executing it through frontline teams and leaders.

Marsha Acker: Nice. Feels like really important work, especially in customer focused organizations.

Scott Downing: It is, and the world is changing as well. So a lot of people talk about customer experience but I think there's a danger now that it has a badge of meaning many, many different things. I think we've got to be very careful of, is it customer service and support or is it customer experience, and it's different. And that's that the sweet spot that I'm really passionate about at the moment.

Marsha Acker: And what do you see as the difference between those two things?

Scott Downing: I think service and support is a given in any organization. Whether it's something where it's customer facing or it's over the phone or live chat, whatever that is, customers, whatever the vertical and channel expect to be able to get help. The experience is, how easy is it? Is it in a way, in a method, and a media that is good for me? Is it receptive? Is it quick? Is it effective? Does it teach me to not ask the same question again? All of that is around removing effort and friction for the customer and I think that's the difference.

Marsha Acker: We got started in model building I think about the same time. I'd love to hear your experience of beginning to do some model building. Can you take us back to that time?

Scott Downing: Yeah, happily. And I think, as you and I both know, it comes out of structural dynamics which we both did actually learn at the same time and went through that program. That was one of the first times, I think for me, professionally, where I found a model that I felt sat with my true beliefs and values because it was morally neutral.

Getting into structural dynamics and taking that to the third level was something that I was really passionate about and again, we're talking 10 years later, it's still in my repertoire. It's not something I quote, it isn't labeled, it's just something I naturally do because it is so aligned to my values and I think that's why model building was an interest to me and why that's also stuck. Because if you think about one of the three pillars within the model building, it's about me and my personal model for being and living and I realize that values drive me immensely.

So I have a real inherent belief between right and wrong, and what model building has helped me do is capture that but also not let that drive me in the wrong way. So just because I believe this is right doesn't mean that I have to always inflict that on people. And I think there's some good examples even quite recently for me where as I tap into the model building, I've realized that certain things professionally and culturally in the corporate and just the working environment are not aligned to my belief system. And I've gone, "This isn't working for me. Why am I not happy? What is not happening there?" That's because it's misaligned to my personal and professional values, and I own that and then I can make informed choices of how to deal with that. But it doesn't drive me now because I'm in control of that.

Marsha Acker: I think there are quite a few people out there listening who likely identify with being inside an organization or a system that they start to notice they're rubbing up against a different set of values from what they might have and then maybe feel stuck or not sure what to do. They notice the difference or they notice the contrast. How have you navigated that?

Scott Downing: It's a good question and I think again, I can happily and naturally link it back to the model building because I know it's my model for living which is driving that, but I know how to operate with that in my leadership model. So I think if we use the same example of culturally there being things going on which are misaligned to my personal values, there are times when I have chosen to put up and shut up. I have professionally made that informed choice, whereas if I wasn't aware of what was going on, I'd be like, "Oh, this is wrong. Why are you doing that?" And, "I need to go in and fix this," because I'm also naturally a fixer. If we use structured dynamics language, I'm a move. I'm a massive move and I want to fix, and I do that in meaning which is all about theory and values and stuff.

Marsha Acker: You've said there's an intentionality and a choice by being able to look at a model for living and a model for leadership and say which one of those is... It's almost like looking at them on a balance scale of some kind.

Scott Downing: Yeah, and I think that's where I love this. Before all of this work, I think applying this framework and model has allowed me to realize that emotion doesn't have to drive me. This has helped me understand where the emotion is coming from and how important that emotion is to me. If I go back, I don't know how many years prior to all of this work, so 10 years plus, I remember being on meetings and feeling my neck get red because I was physically manifesting what I would now call anger. I was like, "You're making me angry." And there's times where I know I've flipped it.

Whereas now, what I know is happening is you are doing something that is completely misaligned with my values. I can clearly articulate that now in a calm and professional way. So I find myself now using language around, "I think we probably need to stop this conversation and take it offline. I think there's multiple dialogues happening here that are crossing. I don't think everyone needs to be party to this conversation." All of that is diffusing, but it's also diffusing me.

Marsha Acker: Yeah, it sounds like there's something about being really clear about your model that also activates your bystand. So that would be one of the four actions that David talks about of move, follow, oppose and bystand. But one of the things that the theory says about bystand is that it is the action that has the greatest potential to change the nature of the outcome. They're all important, but that one has the ability to change.

Scott Downing: I don't think I've ever really thought of it like that, but you've hit the nail on the head because it resonates. What I used to do is go straight into a pose or I throw the towel in and just follow. And then with follow came resentment because I wasn't brought into it. Or it would be that, we talk about this in the training, people go to do follow but they don't actually follow. So the action professionally, you don't deliver the initiative or you don't do the work because you're just following because it's the path of least resistance. Whereas you're right, now what I won't do is follow or oppose because I don't believe in either of them. I'll bystand so I can create a new dialogue in a different arena.

Marsha Acker: That's really powerful. Do you have an example of sometime that you've been in a situation like that or where you notice you've really leaned on your model for leadership in a tough situation?

Scott Downing: The one that really resonates with me, and it actually had quite a substantial impact on me health-wise, there was a time where in a large corporate I was put into a different reporting line. And I referenced it early, in my model for living I have high values and I was brought up very traditionally English, you know, please, thank you, respect, et cetera. And there was an individual who was more senior than me who would very command and control. "You do it how I say. I

don't care if you've got more knowledge or you are the expert, I wear the badge of seniority and therefore you'll do it how I want it and when I want it." With that came unreasonable deadlines, expecting people to wear weekends and nights with not the right tools to do the work.

And it wasn't just me. I was watching people crumble around me and be in tears and come to me for solace and security and support. And they weren't even in my direct reporting line. There was one instance where we were in different locations and we were on video and I was asked a question in front of my peers and more senior people and I was about, it felt like three words in, I was probably three sentences in, but I was told to shut up and this person put their hand over the camera as if to stifle my face.

Marsha Acker: Wow.

Scott Downing: And I was gobsmacked. I really wanted to go into a pose, but because of, again, my actual personal model of respect and respecting hierarchy, I just did not know what to do. So one, I was in high stakes. Two, I felt embarrassed about the people because of the people around me. Three, I felt confrontation. And four, the biggest one was I actually went into child and I felt like I was being slapped by an elder.

Marsha Acker: Just as you describe the structure of that situation, I was already noticing my palms getting a little sweaty in the conversation. So that says a little bit, right, about my own behavioral model, but I'm speechless about... Yeah, I'm speechless about that.

Scott Downing: And I caught up with a good friend of mine probably about six weeks ago for coffee and we still talk about that situation and similar situations because she actually left the business because of this leader. But I was thinking about the model building and how I did it very similar to what's in the workbook where I had the three discs and then I put the discs around it so that it was a visual snapshot, and within the leadership model, the biggest word that I would have if I did it as a word cloud would be "Professional" and "Professionalism".

So in that scenario, I've got high stakes, childhood story coming in, embarrassment, questioning my ability professionally, and all of that was in my model for living that was triggered. But my leadership model, because I was in a leadership situation was, "Be professional." Now rewind 10 years before, I would've either got up, walked off, hung up, had some sort of physical reaction, but I literally just shut down. I didn't speak, I dropped eye contact and I just went internal, which is really rare for me because that's not my survival mechanism. I'm not a snail, I don't go into my shell.

But my professional model kicked in and said, "Remain professional. Remain professional. That's what you about, that's what's important to you. Do not respond. Do not respond." And then a whole series of events came after that

where, like I said, it started to impact me. My health, I started to get quite ill by all of that, and at that point I was like, "Right, enough".

Marsha Acker: What happened after that meeting? So did you continue that high stakes behavior of withdrawing and being silent?

Scott Downing: I thought about this, because it's blank. I rarely struggle to know what the next two-week post that were. I mean, I was in a completely different city and state to the individual and all I remember is, I seem to recall it was towards the end of the day and I think it was just like, pack up my desk and go home.

Post that, I remember being very nervous the next time I was going to see the individual face to face when we were in the same physical location. But what I do remember, their response was as if nothing had never happened because in their world it hadn't because that was their normal operating method and mode. Probably didn't even resonate three minutes after it had happened, and no one that was party to seeing that would have felt enough psychological safety to challenge or report it.

Marsha Acker: My guess would be that person not really even realizing the impact and the wake.

Scott Downing: Wouldn't realize and probably if they did realize would have very low care factor.

Marsha Acker: How does this inform your leadership model?

Scott Downing: Well again, it goes back to that professionalism, but I think one of the things that whole scenario is activated in me is the awareness of the need for more affect. So in my personal life, affect is there. I wear my heart on my sleeve, I'll openly talk to people about, I'm transparent. The person you see at work is the person you see at home. This is Scott. However, when I'm in full-on work mode, particularly as a leader of teams and functions, I'm very driven on execution. Goes back to the keyword on the model. Professional. To be professional in my model, that means getting shit done.

But what I do do is I pride myself on getting things done through and with people. So building strong teams, hiring quality and high-caliber people around me, surrounding me with people that will make us a team. And then I don't see myself as the leader of the team, I see me as part of a team. But what I do know my weak spot in my professional model is the lack of affect at times, yet that scenario was completely driven from no affect. Over this period of this 10 years, what I have done, and I'll openly talk to my teams about this, is I tend to hire people that are exceptionally good at what they do but are also quite high in affect because they bring to the team what I don't.

But then as we build that relationship, I'll go, "Look, I'm not asking you to play a certain role, however I know it's there and it's important but I can forget it. It's not naturally forefront of my professional model, so call me on it, please. You have permission to call me on it." Or you have permission to change the discourse of what's happening in this environment by saying, "Hey, should we just stop and do some team building?"

In my professional model, I'm low in effect. I own that. What has recently happened is through multiple organizations, we've gone through certain profiling tools and psychological tools where you become labeled a lack of a color. In LSI, I am low in yellow and green and I'm high in red and blue. Now in structural dynamics, that's move. I actually then became branded red and the definition of red is, "Be brief, be bold, be done, be gone." So talk to me, give me the numbers, I'll make a decision, go get it done. And that's what I expect. Now with that comes no collaboration, no dialogue. It's a monologue.

Marsha Acker:

I just want to double click on that story because I think there are hundreds, probably thousands of tools that all have their use and their purpose and their gifts in terms of making sense of human beings at work. Introducing and doing this work in leadership teams over and over again, one of the things that I keep stumbling on is what I would call the misuse of some of those instruments. Pick the instrument that you want to talk about.

But this notion of teams branding one another, I love the story that you're telling about that and how that can be dangerous because the team that I was just with said, "Hey, I want to be really careful that we are not..." I don't know that they used the term branding, but that's sort of what they meant because I just left an organization and I think it was a color thing and the individual said, "Somebody walked up to me and said, 'I'd like to see your profile. I hear that you're this color and I want to see what an asshole does.'"

And I thought, "Wow." We are never going to make progress on working with one another if we can't find a way and a language to be able to talk about what's happening without the demeaning judgmental shame-laden... What's the value for you? What's your experience of working with something that's morally neutral?

Scott Downing:

I think it's a perfect question because you sort of resonated with me again then in that summary of, there's value in everything. So if I go back to the scenario of me being uber red, what that did mean is because within my leadership model and about being transparent and humanistic, I owned that and what I did is say, "Hey team, I'm going to be super red right now. I need this now. This is DEFCON one type stuff." So it gave me permission to own it, to execute.

Marsha Acker:

I hear a lot of clarity for you as you talk about your models and even one of the things I'm appreciating right now is this dance between the models, both your behavioral model, your model for leadership and your model for living. How has having these models defined served you?

Scott Downing: Before I answer the question, I was going to say I don't think they're ever defined. I think they're evolving. You and I talked about this recently around, I really, really struggled getting these down on paper. So I think your workbook is amazing because it just strips back all the complexity, it puts it into layman's terms and it's something that I can relate to. And having done it, I can relate to it more. So even recently looking through your workbook, I've tweaked stuff.

So I don't think they're ever down, but the fact that I know there's this framework, and if I was to strip it so back to basics, I would say there's these three jugs with words in of who I am and sometimes all of the jugs fall over on the table and there are all these balls with these words on and they're just all out. They're all on the table. And that's me. That's me. And some will be red from the red jug and some will be blue from the blue jug and blue jug's the professional jug and all that type of stuff.

Because I'm so visual, I just see I've got all these little ping pong balls with the words on, that sometimes they jump between the jugs. So something that is so core in values, which is in my model for living, of course it comes up in my behavioral model because I will do something that is values-driven. So I will say, "Oh my God, you look super tired. It's 11 o'clock on Friday afternoon. After this call, after this Zoom I want you to cancel everything in your diary. You go home for the day and you don't put any leave in. This is on me because I need you to recharge. I don't want see you like this." That's all of the models in one. Do you know what I mean?

Marsha Acker: Yeah. That's a really great example.

Scott Downing: I'm not sure if that answers the question. It's very fluid, but I think once you've got something, don't over intellectualize them. Because for me, it's what's on the ping pong board that's more important than what jug they're in.

Marsha Acker: Yep. Well I just hear a lot of clarity and as you describe different situations, I hear you being really intentional about your choices in those moments.

Scott Downing: Yeah, and I think that's where the longer you are around structural dynamics and the longer you are around your models you can be that. And it just becomes... I keep using the phrase, and if we talk about this 10 year period, I would say probably eight years ago I was quoting that structural dynamics is in my DNA because it's so easy to absorb. I'm so brought into it because it's just that moral neutrality, which plays to my high values. So it just becomes a way of being.

And I think a tip would be, which is what I love about your workbook, it's got the right amount of theory and practice. That means once you get yourself to that point, just don't over-intellectualize this. Don't. Just take away whatever you've got at that point in time and run with it. And I think you use that phrase, "You've got this, let's run with it," or whatever. And that's it. I think that's why you and I

probably partnered when we were going through the [inaudible 00:24:08] because we think so similar, but yeah, just go with it. Don't struggle with the theory, just take whatever bit of it you can.

Marsha Acker: I love that tip. A podcast a couple episodes ago was with Sarah Hill and I told the story of my first encounter with Sarah sharing an example of team coaching and how I thought about team coaching in one way. There was another person that thought about it in a different way and there was something that Sarah had said that day that just flew in the face of all of the things that I thought. Created so much dissonance in question for me and I wanted to engage in this debate about it. And she just simply sat back and said, "They have a different model." Period, end of sentence. And I thought, "Well wait a minute, what does that mean?"

So I get a lot of joy out of thinking about just that phrase because I think there is a tremendous amount of value in being able to sit with difference, to see difference, to see contrast, to see being in a space and it's against your values or working with someone who works in a completely different way than you do and being able to sit and say, "It's a different model." I'm curious about what your experience has been in running up against that.

Scott Downing: With all, again, transparency, here it comes out again, I still struggle with that. So with model clash, I'm okay because I spot it. So I see it, which is the gift, and I love that. I've got the gift. Again, thank you to Sarah and Tony. Then where it becomes hard for me and the struggle kicks in is if there's something so different only when it comes to that value set.

So you might have a model of, "I just move forward. I believe I'm right. I'm the expert. I want to get stuff done and I lead through command and control," for example. That's not me. However, I can work with that because I'm aware of that model difference and there is an element of model clash in that. Where I really, really struggle with it is when there's behaviors around shutting people down, not listening to people's opinion or voice or letting them off a perspective or this is the big one for me, passive-aggressive behavior in the work environment.

Marsha Acker: You gave one tip for somebody entering this model-building space. Any other guidance you would give for leaders out there? Busy leaders running from one thing to the next, which I think many of us do on entering this process of model building.

Scott Downing: So I think the first one is, yeah, don't over-intellectualize it and don't expect to get it done. And I think probably the Sub dot point of that is don't be really hard on yourself with a timeline. And I think you and I both learned this. "How long is it take?" And we got the answer, "As long as you want it to," and it's like, "No, no, that's not the answer I'm looking for" And then now the irony as I'm sat on the other side going, "Yeah, don't worry. It will emerge. It will emerge, just go with it."

But the work is never done, but the complete it finishes in is all. It's like, "Well if I'm going to put some time in this or if we go quite corporate, if this is on my development plan for this year or as a team of people we are doing this intervention, how long is this intervention going to need support?" Yeah, you've got to do that. But I would just say bite it down into bite-size chunks. Make it achievable, but don't worry if it's not done because having one 10th done really well will have a bigger impact on your leadership style and your personal being than trying to get 10 done really weak. It's not going to work.

Marsha Acker: That was probably one of the greatest things that I struggled with. So power is really high for me. In structural dynamics, language, that's the language of getting things done. And so completing things, wrapping things up in a... I don't think that work is ever done, but being able to point to something written down or wrapped up for the moment was a really strong desire of mine, and I struggled with that for quite some time.

I found it really difficult to sit in the incompleteness of it. I value it now, in reflection, and I think what I'd say to myself now is, "It took as long as it needed to take," but it was hard to sit in that because of my tendency to want to have things buttoned up.

Scott Downing: And I think there's nothing else I can add to that apart from 100% ditto because I move power, which if we go back to that branding, which is stuck red, that's all the same behavioral characteristics that you would see manifest in me if I was picking this up for the first time. And you're right, it's a difficult space to sit in, but it's worth it. So just let it immerse. Just immerse yourself in it. Just go there and then once you're in it, it will emerge naturally piece by piece and just don't fight it.

And I think your workbook gives you that framework, because what I miss... Actually, here's a point that's just come up for me. What I missed in the original training is I had no way of looking forward to at least appreciate what might be ahead of me. So the unknown was more unnerving than knowing I couldn't achieve all of it in a set period of time because it was going to be too hard or too big.

I would rather have known that you've got to get to A to K and this is what it could look like and it could take you one week or seven years. I'd be like, "Okay, at least I know there's A to K to tick off. That's fine." Whereas all I had was A and I was told the rest would come to me. We've just talked about moving power. That freaked the hell out of me. Now, I don't know whether David designed it in that way. If he did, good on him, but it just wasn't scalable.

Marsha Acker: Yeah, that's perfect. Well Scott, I end every podcast with a speed round of questions. Just I say a sentence and you complete it with the first thing that comes to mind. So are you ready?

Scott Downing: Okay. No pressure.

Marsha Acker: You can't get it wrong, right? Leading change is?

Scott Downing: Difficult.

Marsha Acker: One thing people get wrong about changes?

Scott Downing: They do it too fast and they don't appreciate the impact on people from an emotional perspective, not just a capability perspective.

Marsha Acker: One thing you wish for leaders today?

Scott Downing: More time to reflect and invest in themselves.

Marsha Acker: Can I plus one your... A moment where having a model for change has helped me.

Scott Downing: There's many. So I think some of the examples I've given today, but I think if I was to sort of summarize it, I would say... It's hard, because like I said to you, it's so in me. I would say it's probably dealing with big corporate structural changes which impact multiple people, particularly when I've been in matrix organizations because there's so many people and so many personalities at play simultaneously.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. Scott, thank you so much for coming on the show today and sharing your story. If people want to get in touch with you, what's the best way for them to do that?

Scott Downing: If you just look me up on LinkedIn, I think just Scott Downing, you'll find me. Yeah.

Marsha Acker: Perfect. We'll put a link to your LinkedIn bio in the show notes. All right. Thanks Scott, I appreciate it. Good to see you.

Scott Downing: You too. Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to talk to you again.

Marsha Acker: One of the things I appreciate so much about Scott is his clarity of knowing his behavioral model and how it informs both his model for leadership and his model for living. You also hear in his story how having defined values in his model for living, he was able to navigate a situation in his leadership that stepped on those personal values in a real way.

Models don't make difficult situations disappear, but I do believe they help provide you clarity, particularly when the stakes rise, to help you navigate situations in a way that feels most resonant for you. I think that's the source of

clarity and confidence. And in moments of crisis, sometimes the confusion slips away when you can be really clear about what's important to you.

David Cantor suggests that part of our model for living is to define our values, and in the builder model for leading change book I've devoted a whole chapter to this. You get to explore the big arching question of, what does it mean to live a life worth living? Do you live to work or work to live? And what do you value? And how do you live into those values every day? So if you don't have a copy yet, you can visit buildyourmodel.com and buy a copy of the book.

If you're interested in engaging in any level of leadership development or learning more about structural dynamics, or you'd like to join our fall cohort program for agile coaches, you can reach out to us at info@teamcatapult.com. We would love to have a conversation with you. You can find links to Scott's information and other links mentioned in the podcast at teamcatapult.com/podcast.

I really appreciate you being here. Keep growing your leadership range and defining your own model for leadership, living, and change, and I'll see you next time.