



## Defining Moments of Leadership with Marsha Acker and Theron James on Trust Based Leadership



Marsha Acker:

Hi everyone. I'm Marsha Acker, and this is Defining Moments of Leadership. Do you lead by fear or by trust? Does your propensity for getting things done actually build dependency on you and get in the way of growing others? Or do you allow room to make mistakes and learn both individually and collectively? These are questions we are going to unpack today. I had such an insightful and thought-provoking conversation with today's guest about trust-based leadership, what he believes about it, where it comes from, what he's learned, and how he's building a product and a culture based on it. I cannot wait to dive into the conversation and for you to get a chance to hear what he has to say.

So let me introduce you to Theron James. He is the CEO and creative director of Wildseed Games, a startup building NextGen games for a globally diverse audience. Most recently, Theron served as director of development at Riot Games where he drove high performance production operations for game development, publishing and eSports. Over the course of his career, he has built and led successful teams at Disney, Sony, Warner Bros, and many others. Theron is a devoted husband, an avid biohacker, functional fitness coach, Marshall artist, and a huge anime geek. Let's dive in.

Theron, welcome to the podcast. You and I met, I think it was about seven or eight years ago. And then I had an opportunity to work with you a little bit more closely when you moved into the position of director of development and production at a Game Studio. And I remember at that time, one thing that stood out for me was in my conversations and interactions with you that you had, I guess what I would call, a modern way of thinking about or viewing leadership. And since one of the objectives of this podcast is we're all about people defining their own model for leadership here, I'm curious about how you came to that view of leadership or what's your view on leadership?

Theron James: Yeah, I would definitely say it's rooted in kind of the common phrase servant leadership, but it's certainly evolved and taken on its own life. And so I think of it as the activated form of servant leadership, and it's only because there's a bit more of leaning in and being really connected to the people you lead that is not necessarily at least always inherent in, if you can call, traditional servant leadership.

Marsha Acker: I love the phrase activated. What does that mean to you?

Theron James: So for me, it's a combination of bringing the best of yourself as a participant to really activating all of your strengths to engage people holistically. It's like this activation or quickening of the best of everyone in the group, and you need to do that for yourself before you can do it for a group you lead.

Marsha Acker: I love what you're saying about wanting to bring more of that into the world. So you today are the CEO of Wildseed Games. Do I have that right?

Theron James: Yes. So currently I'm CEO and I'm basically the whole C-suite right now as well as I'm creative director and game director for the game we're working on. So I'm wearing kind of operational hats, executive hats, financial hats, HR hats, pretty much all the hats at the top of the company. We're a small startup team of about 12. And we're a very flat organization, which I'm sure we'll get into, but I started the company to be Teal, which there's a bunch of meaning to what that means and how that shows up and what leadership even looks like in a organization like that.

Marsha Acker: Well, what's your vision for how you'll bring leadership out in that organization?

Theron James: So there's a few kind of layers to it, and I'll digress a minute to give a little context for it because I think it helps. So while I was at aforementioned Game Studio, there was a lot of emphasis there about leadership. I'm the kind of person that if I know something is important to an environment and I get pretty obsessive about it, whatever I had developed or learned or understood about leadership up to that point, I was determined to add a lot more to it. So I spent a significant amount of time really digging into different frameworks and different views and reading lots of books on it, just trying to get a bigger, broader perspective on the topic so that I could make more nuanced choices in my role as a leader. It gave me a, I think, a broader dimensional view of leadership. A lot of the frameworks, when you get into the really robust ones, they talk both the strategic and the tactical, both kind of the soft, which I hate that phrase, but I generally tend the human versus the more business and pulling all of those together in that role.

And so the way I look at leadership within our company is primarily everyone is a leader at some moment. So one of the motifs we use, which I believe if I have my reference correct, it was coined inside the Navy Seals team, this idea of dynamic subjugation. So it's the idea that even though it's a military unit and

there ranks and there's a structure, when you're in the field, whoever takes command is the commander in that moment because the stakes are too high and we don't have time to check hierarchies. And so we try to adopt that same thing for our self-managed self-organized teams where it depends on the context and what are we working on, who we should follow. And so because of that, we make sure we equip folks with the skills and mindset and orientation to be able to function as a leader in any given moment.

Marsha Acker: Nice. How does that serve you? I can imagine all different kinds of scenarios where that might play out to your benefits, certainly in a small startup organization.

Theron James: Yeah. One, it just creates a resiliency across the team. When you have structures where leadership is compartmentalized, I'll phrase it, if for whatever reason it's not available or there's any kind of bottleneck or bandwidth issues on it, it hurts the organization. The other is engagement. Because when you take that approach, you just see a deeper level of engagement from everyone because they feel a greater sense of ownership and autonomy. They know that when they're in a context where their expertise is valuable in a leadership role, they can put that hat on for its brief or as long as necessary to help guide the team using their experience and expertise.

Marsha Acker: That's awesome. Have you noticed any challenges as you scale and as the organization grows?

Theron James: The biggest one particularly for a startup is just orienting people to that culture. It is not standard or normal. There are a lot of places that are actually counter to that. We often joke that we're running a rehab center for game death because we're just reorienting people around a lot of these kind of cultural conventions that don't necessarily lean into that ideology.

The other I think is even just the kind of culture shock of that being an expectation and having that kind of freedom and autonomy. One of my favorite phrases that I use over and over, and I even squeezed it into one of our slides on our orientation deck, is specifically for me, "Ask for forgiveness, never permission." And so any time someone asked me for permission to do something, I correct them that they should not be asking for permission. They should have done it already and told me what they learned. So there's a lot, even for myself, even though I embrace these ideas, I built a company around these ideas, I'm still indoctrinated with other cultures and other companies and background that I also have to unwind my own behavior out of.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. What structures do you have in place to help you with that? I share your philosophy certainly about learning versus asking permission. And then if I'm really honest, there are times where I've thought, "Ah! That surprised me" and then I have to watch. So part of that for me looks like reflection and creating a bit of space before I speak a lot of times. So I'm curious if any of that happens for you and what structures you have in place.

Theron James: Oh, absolutely. So some of it is just built into how we work on a kind of Meta team level. Just a simple example is we use a lot of agile things. So we have sprints. But our sprints have... Really the first time I've ever seen the structure, is what we're doing here is we have technically a three-week sprint, but the third week is a entire week we call retro week. So it is exactly that. It's about spending a lot more time to hold space for reflection for retrospective on multiple levels, not just as a team in an organization, not just about the product we're working on, but as an individual. Because it all comes down to, "What is my individual behavior pattern and how can I continuously improve that?" And so giving enough space in between those conversations and team reflections and workshops and exercises, all the cool things that we do to help process that and help people think through that and articulate and share and kind of align on, "Okay, we're here a set of things that we want to collectively do." And then we plan out the next body of work.

So it's things like that. We try to weave in that space and time for reflection. If you're really trying to be a true learning organization, you have to go at the pace that the organization can learn, not at the pace that you would like things to hit. That could be a struggle some days. Many days.

Marsha Acker: I hear that. I'm fascinated by a retrospective week. That sounds deliciously awesome. So what happens? Is it truly a week?

Theron James: Yes, so it is a week for probably two main reasons. One, we're a four-day workweek company, so it's basically three days of kind of retro inflection and a fourth day of planning. So it just kind of works out that way. We spend a good chunk of time on each, so there's usually 90 minutes to two hours. We use a lot of liberating structures which ensure when we're doing our collective work that all voices get heard. We make a lot of space for that. And then we give... There's typically homework.

It's really deep dive. For us, it's really about digging deeper because some people do have their best ideas in the first hour. But others have their best idea a day later after having been able to go sleep on a conversation they listen to. And so that's another big factor of it because we have such an emphasis on active listening as a skill, like a primary skill that everyone needs to develop. We need extra time for that one. It's not a habit, right? We don't all come from places where that was kind of the default. So we created that space so that we could practice that stuff. It's really not so much about it being a week, it's just more about for the team we have and where we are, are we taking enough time to practice these things that we know are really valuable to moving us closer to our goals?

Marsha Acker: Yeah. As I hear you reflect about both where you want to go, but also the structures that you've put in place as the thoughtful intention of slowing something down long enough to make sure that you've got people with you. And I imagine that your startup is likely no different than any other startup. I imagine the pace can be fast, but creating something that's different, that has a

different feel to it and a different energy to it, I make up all kinds of benefits about that. That sound like they really align with your vision as well. So that's beautiful.

Theron James: Thank you. Yeah, I see so much value for the individuals, which is rewarding. And then I get so much out of it myself being able to participate, and that's my playground I come to work, right? It does border on like, I would do this for free if my family would allow me because it's so connected to really mining the value that people kind of represent in terms of being able to collaborate together and work on things and create things together.

Marsha Acker: There's so much conversation today post COVID of being in workplaces where people feel burnt out or they're exhausted or there's some portion of the organization that's not happy. So it feels like there's a lot of conversation that happens at a big meta level just around burnout and not feeling heard and not feeling like they have the space. So I think that's one of the other things that's coming up for me as I hear you talk about being in a place where you'd be willing to go to work for free, and maybe there are others in your life who would prefer you not do that, but that you'd be willing to do that. So I think that says a lot about the environment you're creating it. It's something that I wish we all had the ability to do, was to be in a space every day where you actually wanted to be there. It felt renewing.

Theron James: Yeah, it's interesting. I was having a conversation with Ren recently and we were talking about... I forget where they heard it, but it was the workism was the phrase, the coined phrase. And it was this idea that as our society has evolved, work has become a place where people want more meaning and connection. It's kind of what's behind Teal, like one of its tenets is this idea of evolutionary purpose of an organization.

So in many ways it's interesting that a while ago you alluded to you viewing me as having a modern view on leadership, and for me it is. A lot of it is that, it's like, "Well, what are the best ways to do it that we know now?" Not what we knew 10 years ago or longer, but what's a better way to do it? I'm kind of obsessed with... I'm the person that like, "Oh, you want a radio? Okay, let me go Google the best radio." I'm going to read all the list of best radios before I suggest something. Not that much different when it's like, "Well, what's the best ways to organize humans to get the most out of the collective power that they represent?"

Marsha Acker: I'm noticing I have a lot of alignment with how you're talking about leadership, so we could talk for hours about that.

Theron James: Now that we're kind of in this frame, another way I kind of think of it because this is ties to the kind of Teal organization principles is it's like trust-based leadership. That's another, I think, dimension to it. I think a lot of our previous year, decades leadership was fear-based, that it's about making sure bad actors don't hurt the business. And so we need lots of rules and we need that check in

and we need people to get permission so we make sure the wrong thing doesn't happen. This approach is much more trust based. It's like, "Hey, as long as we as leaders have done a really good job making the north star really clear, making priorities and goals really clear, then we trust the people who we've hired and brought into the organization to apply their best judgment and learn along the way." That learning loop has to not only be tolerated, it has to be encouraged and embrace.

Marsha Acker:

We do a lot of work in organizations and have been taking the theory of structural dynamics into organizations. And so one of the things that structure says is that we have two different sort of sets of behavior, our behavior in low stakes when we're at our best and our behavior in high stakes when we're at our worst. Our behavior does change between low stakes and high stakes. I have begun to realize something quite fascinating, but for a while there was a team we were working with that was having a really difficult time making the distinction between what's the difference between low stakes and high stakes. We were having this conversation about what is high stakes and kind of some pushback on the definition.

What I have come to realize is that they live in an organization that leads by fear. And so they spend 90 plus percent of their day in high stakes. So what became this fascinating learning for me was for them, there really isn't a difference between low stakes and high stakes. The stakes are always high. They live in a constant state of high stakes. And so I've really been thinking a lot about the impact of that. And as I start to look across now different teams and different organizations, I'm starting to see that similar pattern. There's very little difference between the behavior of low stakes and high stakes because people spend their day in high stakes. That's where our reactive fear-based behavior comes from. That can't be good long term.

Theron James:

No, and often not even short term. I've absolutely seen that. I've worked at places. I've participated in that, right? That's what fear kind of does. It's like, "Okay, I'm only concerned about the perceived risk." The irony of it is everyone knows is that when we take risks, we see the biggest breakthroughs. That's when things get disrupted, that's when new things emerge when we go outside of the low risk items. Yet we spend a lot of time there because of these kind of fear-based structures and incentives and cultures and hierarchies.

Marsha Acker:

You've participated in some of those organizations and you've been in some of those organizations, but I think we all have defining moments of leadership, likely more than one for any of us. But I'm curious about a moment that you've had in your past that shaped how you think about leadership in some way.

Theron James:

Yeah, absolutely. I've been on poorly managed traditional projects and done death marches and at 3:00 AM writing code that I couldn't understand the next day. I've been through all of that. So this stuff just really made sense because it seemed more humane. That was my immediate takeaway, is that this seems to be trying to create a circumstance of just a bit more humane than we

sometimes get into. And so out of that, I really started doing kind of a deep dive with Scrum. I did Ken Schwaber's, one of the founders or creators or kind of codifying Scrum, I did his workshop and I joke I drank all of the Kool-Aid. I was like, "Oh, okay. This is my new way. This is the light." It was through the first really major project I worked on where I was really trying to practically apply it.

So even before just in my life and career, I was aware of servant leadership. I understood the kind of concept behind it, but certainly in work didn't have a bunch of practical application and examples to work from. And because of my technical background, I had a tendency to solve problems for the team because they were obvious to me and did not give the team space or time to solve them on their own. And at first I thought I was doing a good thing. There were even moments where I pat myself on the back like, "Ooh, I solved a really hard problem." But meanwhile, what I did not realize is I was creating a dependency on the team for me to... Again, it's that bottleneck of like, "Well, there's no point in us solving stuff because Theron will just... He'll probably come up with some things. We'll just wait for that." I need the team to solve this stuff, and they seem to be stuck.

And when I described it, he's like, "Yeah, that's easy. Just stop solving their problems." It's always easy from the people who've been through that, and I'm like, "It's not obvious to me." But it was true and it was difficult, especially at first to... I used to tell my wife, some days I just feel like I'm watching people drift toward a ditch and I can't say anything. But guess what? Within a few weeks, within a few retros, the team started building that muscle and I was able to easily drop back. And the brilliance of it is that, which again, I knew conceptually, but it's that whole trusting that it'll play out that way, is that they came up with ideas that I would've never come up with. That even when they were working on a problem collectively that in my head, I'm like, "See, they don't know they should do this business." And then they would come up with something that I'm like, "Oh, I didn't even know that."

So they were actually able to learn things that I, on my technical journey, had not learned yet or hadn't discovered as alternative routes and sometimes even better routes. So that really stuck with me. This was over 15 years ago. And it has influenced every leadership role I have had since then.

Marsha Acker: I actually hear it's really influencing your current role. I mean, as you talk about building a learning organization and building patients and all the above, yeah, there's so many patterns that seem to track back to that story.

Theron James: Yeah, absolutely. It was certainly a defining moment in my own.

Marsha Acker: If you were speaking to one of those leaders today who's really caught up in that, if I let go or if I stepped back, then what would you say to them?

Theron James: What I start with is it's that kind of thing of eating healthy, right? It's like, okay, no one's going to directly argue that you should eat healthy, but we'll get into particulars of it. And so I'll usually start with like, "Hey, people have a lot more potential than they're exercising or expressing. So how do we tap into that?"

There's a similar argument I would pose when I would try to encourage organizations to just in general decrease the amount of meetings they have for ICs because my argument is like, "Hey, people do their best work when they can really go heads down. In fact, we all know that the magic happens, those really cool solutions come up when people are not distracted, so let's default for that." So it's usually these arguments based on something I know you're going to not disagree with, and then I build to like, "So how can we do more to practically apply it?"

And so it's a similar thing with the leadership of, "Well, hey, you know your team is actually probably has potential to solve more and do more, and it would actually free you up to focus more on the directional stuff." That's the other thing I try to do, even some of the more senior folks, and leave the rest to the learning cycle of the ICs. You've pointed, trust that they'll figure it out, and be there to counsel them when they want to talk through the mistakes they've made or the lessons they've learned or the things that they've discovered.

Marsha Acker: I don't know about you, but I have found that sometimes that need to jump in or be the one bringing the solution often comes from just a pure desire of wanting to be helpful and contribute to moving somebody or something forward. And what I hear you offering is find something else to contribute. So contribute strategic direction or contribute in some other way, but it's a little bit of a pivot.

Theron James: Yeah, absolutely. It's the whole teach a person to fish, right? I could be the best fisherman on the planet, I can't fish for everybody. But if I teach a dozen people, I've started something that can continue even if I'm not around. That approach, going after that value versus the value of just jumping in and solving the immediate problem, that you're strengthening the team's ability to solve and learn and embrace learning is far, far going to outweigh anything you can do on your own.

Marsha Acker: Yeah, I love the story and I'm really appreciating you sharing it, but I also appreciate how you've brought it forward throughout your leadership journey. What's something that you hope for leaders today?

Theron James: I think one of the primary things is finding ways to trust. I think that's one of the things that plagues leadership. And then I think the other thing is finding support for developing that skillset. It can become a very broad and deep skillset, and a lot of organizations don't directly support people. They assume people will just kind of learn on their own or they'll sign up for the two workshops that they offer on leadership and think like, "Great, all my folks have leveled up in leadership." It's a journey. It is one of those things you could spend



a lifetime becoming a really amazing leader. And so I would love for more leaders to start that journey, to invest in that journey, both personally and lobby that in their organization and support that journey.

Marsha Acker: That would be fantastic. We talk a lot about leaders bring the weather, and I think there's so many instances where the greater culture and environment in the organization definitely gets set by those at the top. There are others in the organization that certainly want to do things different, and I think they can make an impact and definitely have a difference, but those moral dilemmas that happen, I think in every organization when the stakes are high are difficult.

Theron James: Yeah, absolutely. I do think that those things also hurt, which is connected because getting better at leadership is just part of a learning cycle. It's just a specific flavor that you want to acquire. But I think that fear-based stuff does prevent... Because I've been at places that they aspire to be a learning organization and they don't realize how some of this fear-based stuff gets in the way because you're actually kind of hindering or putting a drag effect on the company's ability to learn, people to share. I heard Simon Sinek say he likes fall down instead of failure, so share the different times you fell down and share that proudly and broadly so that others can benefit from that. It just doesn't happen in a lot of organizations.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. Well, I imagine there's something quite vulnerable about sharing failures or fall downs. Yeah, so it definitely asks you to put your real self out there.

Theron James: Yeah, I would say that is something also that I've gone further with than I imagined. It was something else I didn't really get because in the context of organizations, I always felt like I was on a spectrum of vulnerable within the organization. Yeah, I sat pretty far on one end, but being able to create an organization kind of from scratch that starts with all these tenets, I have found myself way past that point because now we have a ground where, one, as you said, I have to bring the weather so I absolutely have to be the example. If I make a mistake or I fall down, I absolutely need to share it proudly and broadly. I make it safe for others to do likewise.

There's an interesting moment I have where I do the thing, the phrase "disagree but commit." So I actually love doing it because I'm the CEO and I get to show that it's not about my way or what I think, even though it literally something like, "I don't agree with that. I would do it differently." But I recognize that there's a larger group that's aligned around an equally good idea, so we should just do that and I'll commit to support that.

Marsha Acker: Have you ever had anybody say, 'I don't think I want to'?

Theron James: To that?

Marsha Acker: Yeah.

Theron James: No. No, no. No, not yet. Not yet.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. I can imagine that it's so different for somebody. They might go, "I'm not so sure."

Theron James: No, that hasn't happened. And I think only because, again, there's a spectrum to adopting this kind of new way of being, and everybody's at a different place in their journey. So when they do get to that point where they're ready to push back and say, "Hey, no," they have a good head space around it. So the confidence is there because they're only doing it because of the confidence. And to me, it's almost like they're testing the boundaries of like, "Okay, I think this is right. He said pushback."

Marsha Acker: I would imagine those are moments where you build trust just a little bit more deeply with the people you're working with.

Theron James: Yeah, absolutely. I think what starts to happen is that people accept it as the kind of new normal and then begin to get comfortable operating in those parameters. It has worked really well. It creates a stickiness to our organization that I really haven't seen. We've had our turnover, we've had people leave, but I've never seen the parting so emotional except for maybe one person. People always reach back out to tell me how much they miss this aspect or that aspect. There's something that they miss and they're either trying to convince their current company to adopt it or embrace it somehow. So now they're an advocate, which is great. That's a little bit of what's actually behind the name Wildseed, is this idea of I wanted to create a place that incubates people in a culture that even if they leave, it so sticks to them as a better way that they're going to be an advocate for it somewhere else, and maybe that can be a seed that gets planted somewhere else. So if we evaporate today, there's about 20 people that that know. They know.

Marsha Acker: 20 ripple impacts across corporate America.

Theron James: Yes.

Marsha Acker: I love the sharing of the meaning behind the name too. Yeah, that's really great. We're coming up on the end of our time together. I'm enjoying our conversation, but I'm going to move us to the speed round questions. So are you ready?

Theron James: Yes.

Marsha Acker: Cool. So just the first thing that comes to mind is you hear the phrases. Leadership is...

Theron James: Hard.

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

Theron James: Be more patient with yourself.

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

Theron James: That I'm super serious. I'm a goofball. People don't realize it.

Marsha Acker: Something that brings me joy.

Theron James: Music.

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

Theron James: An evolving one. One that's always getting better.

Marsha Acker: Nice. I've so enjoyed the conversation with you today, Theron. Thank you so much.

Theron James: Likewise. That was a pleasure.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. Yeah, thanks for being on the show. If people have been inspired by this conversation and want to get in touch with you, what's the best way for them to do that?

Theron James: Oh, wow. LinkedIn is really... It's only the social place I live. I don't really do the Twitter and all the other stuff, at least not yet. I keep getting told as a CEO I need to start, so I'll evolve that way too. But right now you can easily find me on LinkedIn.

Marsha Acker: Awesome. So we'll put the link to your LinkedIn page on the show notes so people can find you.

Theron James: Yes, I'm very active there.

Marsha Acker: Fantastic. All right. Thank you so much.

Theron James: Thank you.

Marsha Acker: I hope you enjoyed my conversation with Theron. Throughout our conversation, you hear him describing principles that he holds in his model of leadership and how it informs the actions he takes in the moment with others.

Here are some of the principles that stood out for me, and I'm just going to invite you to grab a sheet of paper and write any of these down that resonate for you and potentially any others that stood out for you in our conversation. Here's some that stood out for me. Everyone is a leader. Go at the pace the

organization can learn, not the pace you would like things to go. I love this. And I love his example of what it looks like in the moment for him right now as they're running three-week sprints and one week retros. It really builds in the time to learn and talk with one another.

Lead with trust, not fear. Model the behavior that you want. Equip folks with the skills and mindset to function as a leader in any moment. Ask for forgiveness, not permission. And in his organization at the moment, this looks like taking action and talking about it in reflection. People have more potential than what they're expressing. Find ways to tap into the collective power in order to collaborate together and create things together. Make it safe for people to learn and be willing to share your own learnings.

And this one has to be one of my favorites. I had many in this conversation, but this was one, is to build a company that plants seeds that spread in corporate America. Boy, did that resonate for me. I don't believe there will be one way in which we bring about change in the way we work in corporations. I do hold there will be many ways and it will take some time, but I absolutely believe that we can all be planting seeds that show others that work and progress and success do not have to be miserable and sold fully. And high stakes. And I believe that we can collectively change the way we work together.

If you're ready to build your own model for leadership, behavior, living and change, then check out [buildyourmodel.com](http://buildyourmodel.com). You can purchase a copy of the guided workbook designed to guide you through your own reflective journey. And if you're ready to deepen your own leadership, particularly if you're working with agile teams, we start our Coaching Agility from Within cohort in just a few months. And you can apply directly at [teamcatapult.com](http://teamcatapult.com). 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.