

EEP Ep 189 Alain Hunkins_ Cracking the Leadership Code

Fri, Feb 23, 2024 12:06AM • 46:59

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, leaders, empathy, leadership, work, talk, number, communicate, lead, communication, connection, receipt, day, job, meeting, human beings, secrets, give, book, district manager

SPEAKERS

Maria Ross, Alain Hunkins

Maria Ross 00:04

Welcome to the empathy edge podcast the show that proves why cash flow, creativity and compassion are not mutually exclusive. I'm your host Maria Ross. I'm a speaker, author, mom, facilitator and empathy advocate. And here you'll meet trailblazing leaders and executives, authors and experts who embrace empathy to achieve radical success. We discuss all facets of empathy from trends and research to the future of work, to how to heal societal divisions and collaborate more effectively. Our goal is to redefine success and prove that empathy isn't just good for society, it's great for business. We are experiencing a transformation and evolution and how we lead and what makes a successful leader. If you've been with me for a minute, you know, we've spoken with amazing guests about the changing paradigms of leadership. Some leaders are embracing this new model, while others may be having a harder time. Today I have a great conversation with La pumpkins, CEO and author of Cracking the leadership code, three secrets to building strong leaders about the common leadership assumptions that can get people into trouble, the obstacles we face and how to connect the three secrets of strong leaders and how we can communicate better, and he'll share the story of how one leader went from being ranked at the bottom to achieving outstanding results by focusing on people first, before the numbers and the work. LA is CEO of Hawkins leadership group, and helps leaders teams and companies achieve performance goals easier. He's an executive coach, leadership and team development facilitator and keynote speaker. And for decades, LA has worked with over 3000 groups of leaders in 27 countries, including 42 of the Fortune 100 companies. Alliance work has been featured in chief executive Fast Company, Inc, training magazine, chief learning officer and Business Insider, and he's also a monthly leadership strategy contributor to Forbes magazine, LA was recently named number 33 on the global power list of the top 200 biggest voices in leadership for 2023 by leaders home. Today we discuss what gets in the way of empathy. The role transparency plays in killing the old leadership paradigm, how employees got to the point that they have such low confidence in their leaders, and what we can do to reverse that. And he'll also share a great trick to ensure you are communicating effectively. This one has so many good nuggets. Take a listen. Allah Hankins, welcome to the empathy edge podcast to talk to us about cracking the leadership code. I love that title. Welcome.

Alain Hunkins 02:50

Thank you so much, Marie. I'm really excited to be here with you today. Thank you.

Maria Ross 02:53

And I'm so glad we connected because you have such an interesting background. And you've been doing this work for a long time. So let's get right into it. About what are some of the common assumptions about leadership that can get people into trouble?

Alain Hunkins 03:08

Yeah, so let's start from the point of view of the assumptions that leaders have about leadership. And actually, I learned this, like I thought about this, because, you know, the studies would say that only about 23% of people think their leaders lead well, right only. And so the state of leadership overall has been poor for quite some time. And I thought about this, you know, I've been studying this for a long time. And I got this great hit one day about a little over 10 years ago. So I have two kids. My son is Alex, my daughter is Miranda. He's now 19. I'm recording this, my daughter is 16. But take them back. They're about six years old and three years old. And the two of them are playing in the living room. They're goofing off, they're getting really loud. And I have to confess Maria, I was in the kitchen. I was trying, I can't even remember what I was trying to get done some kind of work thing. I was trying to get something done. And they were really loud in the living room when I was getting out a little trigger. And I went into the living room. And these were the words that came out of my mouth. I kid you not I said, Would you to stop behaving like children? Right? And I say this. Been there? Okay, you know this right? So this is like not your this is like sub optimal parenting moment. Yeah. So here's the thing. I say this for two reasons. One, it's a ridiculous thing to say because they were a six and three year old, they aren't kids. So how would they behave? But the real reason I'm telling you is because as soon as the words came out of my mouth, I was in shock. Because honestly how they said parenting moment, I had this moment where it was, oh my gosh, I have just said the exact same thing. My mother said to my brother, I think I had to come my mother. And so I shared the story because I think about the assumptions we make we unconsciously inherit habits from the leaders that we have learned all through our lives, whether those are our parents, teachers, people, bosses we've had at work all over. And I think one of the things that so many people the original and premature people have around the leader follower role is power struggle, right because I'm your dad. Add because I'm your mum do what can I say so and so I think when people step into their first formal authority leadership roles, they kind of step into this weight and like, oh, this power thing kind of feels nice, you know, and like, I feel I'm in control, I get to tell people what to do. And that I call that in my book, I write about this too, and other places to call that old school leadership, right, the old school leader was the commander in chief, right, and we don't need commanders in chief. In fact, the world has changed. So significantly. So that's one of the big assumptions is that we have around that the other assumption is what psychologists call the fundamental attribution error, which is a cognitive bias, which basically means that we judge ourselves by our intentions, but we judge other people by their actions. And so we step into leadership, like, I mean, well, I care about people, I appreciate my people. Well, again, the studies would say that, you know, 80 to 85%, of supervisors, managers, bosses say, Yeah, I tell my people, I appreciate them, yet only Why is it 15 to 20% of employees feel like they're being appreciated. So we tend to judge ourselves by, oh, I think this, I feel this, I intend this. But you know, what, you're not closing the gap,

which is why only 23% of people believe their leaders, they will. So those are a couple of the big assumptions that people have about leaders. Okay,

Maria Ross 06:22

so many things there. I'm like nodding my head vigorously for people that can't see me right now, because this old model of command and control is a dying paradigm. And what we're seeing right now is people embracing the new paradigm, but struggling with it, which is why I'm writing my next book called The Empathy dilemma. Our people snapping back to bossism, because it's all they know. And it's what got them as far in their careers as it did. And you're going back to the conditioning that you had in whatever work environments you're in. So you can almost tell the leaders that had really great leadership models, their whole career, because they're actually modeling those behaviors. And, you know, when I talk to those leaders about the secret to being an empathetic leader, or the secret to connection, they almost can't verbalize it. They're like, I don't, I actually don't know what I'm doing. What am I? What am I doing with people that's enabling me to understand them? Because it's so innate, it's so ingrained in who they are and how they lead. They didn't learn or adopt the old way. But, you know, there's so many experts, I'm sure you included, who are talking about the fact that this isn't a preference thing. If you are leading in that old way, you will not win, you will not succeed going forward, we are evolving the leadership paradigm and it's going to move with or without you.

Alain Hunkins 07:42

Totally. And the thing about this evolution of the paradigm, it isn't just human consciousness that is evolving here. This the big kicker, and I write about this too, in my book, is technology. Just think about the level of transparency we have like we didn't have LinkedIn, we didn't have Glassdoor we didn't have indeed 1015 years ago. So now every single leader and company is living in a glass house to realize everyone knows your dirty laundry. So how are you showing up if you are not aware of that. And the thing is also with millennials and Gen Z in the workplace, particularly, I mean, it's amazing because like, I'm dating myself, I'm a Gen X or myself. The idea that, you know, you know, I see this Millennials constantly like, this is a crappy job, I'll quit, I'll move back in with my parents. Rather than take a bad job. Like Gen Xers, we would never move back home. Under eight, I was stuck in a lousy job for years, it meant that things we didn't have the transparency, were they what we do now, as you can tell, how are things what are the Glassdoor reviews? What are things like to work here? And so leaders can't, they can't we don't live in this world of information asymmetry anymore. You know, so this is this is a huge connection. And obviously, people who are more digitally native get this even more so. And also mean the way that millennials and Gen Z's have been raised. They've been asked their opinions their entire lives. I've my kids are now 19 and 16. I mean, my daughter, I remember she had to write a persuasive essay in the third grade, like who's writing it? No one cared what I thought until well, I don't know maybe like I was 35. Somebody was like, yeah, no, no one wanted to know what you thought. And so when you when you grew up with this baseline level of respect, why would you settle for a boss who doesn't show that to you? Again, the number one thing why people leave jobs is a toxic workplace. And the number one toxic behavior is lack of respect.

Maria Ross 09:37

That's it. 100%. So actually, I'm gonna put a link in the show notes of this episode. Since we're talking about it. I interviewed an amazing woman named Ana Liana, who's a generational expert and wrote a

book unlocking generational codes. And she, she has a way of describing and writing about the differences in generations that are not the classic tropes you've heard, right? It's very much about generations our behavior and the way they view everything from voicing opinions to how they value information to what they determine is respect, quote, unquote, or what they determine is professionalism, quote, unquote. They're all influenced mainly by events that happened around their ages of 10 or 11. You can think back with these different generations, what influenced things. And just one thing that stuck with me from what she spoke about, because you mentioned it was how the different generations value information. So boomers and traditionalists saw Information is power to be hoarded, not to be shared. We don't talk about that at work. We don't talk about that with our colleagues. Meanwhile, Gen Z and younger millennials value the democratization of information, we have to disseminate information to as many people as possible so that we can make better decisions. So yes, I am going to air my dirty laundry on Glassdoor Yes, I'm going to share with my colleagues what I'm making and what I got from my raise, or what I got for my bonus, and that might be shocking to leaders. But that is what's happening. And you can't just have a mandate of we're not going to talk about those things at work. Because when we fly with those generations, I mean, that's just such a small example of what you're saying. But it just sparked it when you were talking about this idea of information. Yeah. Yeah, that's huge. All right. So let's talk about the challenges that leaders have in developing empathy with their teams, and how they can overcome that we've talked a lot about on this podcast that many people, we all innately have empathy as human beings. Yes. And some of us the muscle has atrophied. For some of us, it's very strong, but it can be strengthened. So when people when leaders say, I'm just not good at all this connection stuff, right? What is What are they actually saying to you? What is actually getting in their way of forming those connections? Yeah,

Alain Hunkins 11:56

I love this question. So So here's the thing about empathy. I'm sure you've touched on this elsewhere, if this is the empathy edge podcast, is that you know, while human beings we are innately wired to be empathetic, we're not equally empathetic with everyone, right? So if you've talked about the empathy circle, right, so like immediate, close family, great old friends, etc, they're kind of in your immediate empathy circle. And the further you get away, the less empathy that we have for other people. So then throw into the mix now, work. So what does that mean? That means we now have deadlines, and limited resources and performance targets and expectations and too much to do and then of time, suddenly, we start seeing other people as task getter donors, as opposed to people right now, I'm amazed at how often you know, if you listen to a leaders language, it tells you a lot is like when they talk about my people, or they need to do this I it relationship, it's like you really hear that language of now we have to drill this I mean, and again, this is all old inherited history, because the language of business came out of the language of mechanical engineering, you know, which is why we talk about rolling things out and drilling things down. You know, I can't yet I've yet to meet a single employees that, gosh, you know, senior leadership hasn't drilled anything into me lately. Gosh, how I missed that. Right? No one ever says things like that. But that language is so pervasive. Yeah. So this thing about empathy. So what are the things that get in the way, there's a few if you like, your point is like, I'm not really a people person, well, then maybe you shouldn't be leading people. I mean, I have this conversation with a lot of organizations where it's like, you know, like, for example, everyone has heard of like, the tech superstar, who's an amazing software engineer or coder. But you know, don't let them lead the team. And a lot of companies are starting to go down the track of how do we create a specialized, you know, expert

contributor track, where you can get more money, more status, because traditionally, in every organization, if you wanted to get promoted, and all the perks that go along with that the salary, etc, the title, you needed to lead people. Thing is, if you're going to be leading, you're going to be leading people. So frankly, a lot of people just don't like people that much, and they shouldn't be leading, you know, it's like, they want all the perks that come with it. So this is an issue, this is definitely an issue. The other thing I would say, around the other big, a few big barriers, right? I run about six of these in the book, but I'll just share the kind of top two. So top number one barrier, empathy is time, right? So I define empathy as showing people that you understand them and care how they feel. Now we live in a digital workplace where information travels the speed of light, the last time I checked, human beings travel at the speed of human beings, which is a lot slower. And you think about the ability to step back, pause, reflect, how am I feeling? How are you? Listen, reflect, affirm, that takes time, and so many people are feeling compelled, you know, I can't tell you how many leaders I've talked to where they say, you know, the first thing I think about when I wake up in the morning is I have all these things to do. And they go through their very busy day. And the last thing they think about when they go to sleep at night is I didn't get all these things done. Right. It's like that's A horrible, challenging way to live. And so in a lot of companies, we were enforced this right? If you think about how many companies have values that say things like, drive for results, or bias where we have a bias for action, I get it. Like, I understand that you're in the for profit enterprise business to get things done. I have no quibble with that. However, part of the wisdom of being a leader is there's a time and a place to go fast. And there's a time and place to go slow. And leadership, wisdom is knowing when to do which, where and sometimes you need to slow down on the people side, before you can speed up on the task side. And unfortunately, I see too many leaders who, in their drive for results, end up driving over the people who are trying to deliver those results. And there is massive collateral damage when you do that. And we've all experienced it at work, right? When you have the talking the meetings after the meetings, and then like, all this is about, you know, the going escalating things to HR, all these things. And just thinking about the amount of time it takes, you know, most managers would say that HR and interpersonal related issues take up a huge percentage of their time, right? That's all that stuff. And why is that because we didn't catch it earlier. So that's the first number one is time, right? The other big barrier to leading with empathy is that emotions and people are messy by nature, we are we're messy. We're not always the same. I think part of why we love numbers in the business world is because numbers are discreet, neat and tidy. Like if you and I show up to a meeting, we can be guaranteed that if eight walks in that meeting door, eight is always one more than seven and one less than nine today, tomorrow, next week, next year forever. And you know, when you think about how many businesses start their meetings with, let's go over the numbers, right? Because it gives us a sense of certainty and security, right? Oh, our profits are up 12% This month, that's great, because last month, they were 10% liquid. And we can kind of create this whole story based on this. And it gives us the sense of confidence and certainty, when we don't stop and realize you know, all those numbers, which by the way, can be fudged and often aren't, depending on what the numbers are. But all those numbers are only lagging indicators of the behaviors of someone, right? revenue targets, revenue doesn't sell itself. People sell things to make things happen. And so recognizing, you know, what if we shifted our meetings around, and instead of starting with the numbers, and then maybe getting to the projects? And if there's any time talking about the people? What if we flipped the script, and instead started talking about our people? Right? What if when we started our meetings, we checked in where everyone like actually took a centering breath. I'll do one right now, right? And be like, how am I? How are you feeling? Like, and I teach this and you might do

something similar? Teach people a check in three simple questions. Number one, how are you feeling? Number two, what's on your mind? Or what's distracting you? Right? Because there could be something distracting. And number three, how can I or how can we support you? And it's amazing how if people get into the ritual of asking these three questions, what it does is it actually helps people to get their prefrontal cortex back online, because like as humans, we've got all this distraction, all the stuff going on. And so by giving people the time and space to be present, to notice how they're feeling, and you're living in a body, so just to go, Hey, how am I feeling, then suddenly, I can be centered and present, and then I can get on with the task at hand. But if we skip through that all the time, what ends up happening is this sense of uncertainty. And people feel like they can't actually show up as themselves. So Deloitte did this wonderful study a few years ago, and they found that 61% of us employees feel the need to cover their identities in some ways, right? That they don't feel safe, being fully themselves for jetting judged for all sorts of reasons. And the reasons can range from, let's say, I am a lesbian woman, and I don't feel safe coming out at work. That's one reason they might not feel safe. Another reason might be, I could be a white heterosexual man. And I don't feel comfortable saying I want to leave early, because I want to go see my kids at their ballet recital. And I don't want to seem like I'm not a team player or high performer. So I can't actually say that or do that. Right. Totally different reasons. Yet, at the same time, at the end of it, what we're getting is disconnection. And what we know is when we have a low connection, low empathy, culture, what we have is we have low trust and ultimately low performance. So it's a lose, lose, lose, lose, right across the board. Right. So

Maria Ross 19:14

I just want to summarize this, the two biggest obstacles are time. And the fact that we're messy as human beings, right? I love there's so many things in there. I just You were on a roll. I wanted to let you go. But there's so many things in there because this idea of checking in. And well let me back up. This idea of time, comes up over and over and over again. I don't have time. I don't have time to make friends with my team. I don't have time to ask somebody how their weekend was I don't have time. We've got to go go go. And you talk to every variety of experts. And they will say if you don't make the time now you're going to pay for it later. You're going to pay for it and disengagement you're going to pay for it and lack of cohesion and lack of collaboration. You're going to pay for it in terms of poor performance. Yes. So that's almost like somewhat like a leader saying, I don't have time for strategy I just need to execute. Now even though some of them do that, they would never actually say that they do that, right? They would say, of course, we're gonna build a strategy before we go off and spend resources and spend money and have people doing all these things why that would be crazy, right? But yet, we don't do that with our people, which is like one of our most valuable asset classes within the organization, right. But this time issue, I actually did a very informal survey with about 50 respondents, I want to ask what gets in the way of them being empathetic leaders? The number one answer was time. Yeah, whether it's time that you're dealing with work, or the fact that time dealing with your life, no one seems to have enough time. But if like your point, if we actually slow down with we have some self awareness, which is why that's one of the pillars in my new book about being an effective empathetic leader. Spoiler, is that we need to recognize number one, where are we spending our time? Number one, where are we making our connections? And our number two? And number three, what triggers us? Yeah, you know, what, what actually, what about this situation is going to make me go off the rails? What about this situation? Am I going to be able to bring my best foot forward? But we don't stop to think about that. And we think it's a luxury to sit. Think about that when it's really a necessity. Yeah.

Alain Hunkins 21:25

So true. And other thing I like to frame when I'm coaching leaders around this, too, is, you've got to stop thinking about I don't have time as like, Oh, this is costing me something. This is an investment, this eyesight, you have to think you're investing in your people. And not because you should do it's because you need to and want to make because if you just think, oh, this leadership expert told me that I should do this, I'll do this. Hi, how are you feeling? Anything distracting you what's on your mind? How can I support you? Like, everyone's gonna smell that BS a mile away? 100. So it's, so it's like, you have to recognize this. And honestly, like, Look, if you don't, if you don't want to lead people, because they're people, then you're in the wrong job, my friend.

Maria Ross 22:07

No, I always tell people that as they say it, Detroit, it takes me away from the work. But you as a leader, that is the work, you're not the doer anymore. So if you are doing doing doing and you don't have time to lead and manage, then you should be an individual contributor somewhere. You don't get the fancy title and the pay raise. Just for you know, doing the work you have to lead people that is the work of leading people. Yes. So in your book, you talk about the three secrets to building strong leaders. Can you give us a little sneak peek as to what those secrets are? And I know, folks, when you go back to the book,

Alain Hunkins 22:43

and you're out, and I'll tell you the secrets through a story about a guy named Matt. So I met Matt, Matt works for a retail company. And the company has 100 districts all around the USA, but 900, retail 950 retail stores. And there's 100 districts. So every retiree, basically, each district manager has about nine or 10, stores to ish, okay, and I met Matt and a bunch of his colleagues because I was coming in to do a keynote speech at their district manager conference that they have once a year here. And I got a chance to meet a few of the district managers in advance. So I could, you know, tailor the talk to make it more relevant as it were. So it turns out that Matt was the number one top rank district manager out of all 100. And I said, Matt, that's really quite impressive. Have you always been such a high performing leader? And he said, No, actually, when I first got promoted from being a store manager to district manager, I was about 84th out of 100. And I was in the low 80s for about three years until things started to change. So I said, Matt, you got to tell me what changed because this here's a story right at point number one, and you were stuck. There wasn't just random. He said, Yeah. And I think Matt story is sort of a good archetype for many people can recognize and ourselves. And so Matt said when he first got promoted to being a district manager, he was an excellent store manager, which is very executional based, right? It's all very tactical and execution. So basically, he thought, as he said, he said, he thought his job was to be the fixer, like, Okay, I did this all really well in my store and I have nine stores, I'm gonna help them all to fix what they need to do. And in their world, they have a printout they call hotlist. It's basically a metric a key performance indicators every day, they get metrics of, you know what a revenue is in the store, etc. Like the all these things they have. And so the first thing that Matt would do every morning is you print a copy of the hot list for his nine stores. And he'd circle what was in red, right? It's all color coded reds, not measuring up there's the yellow caution green, right. So he's circle, it was in red. And this was his strategy. He would hop in his car and he drive to the first store and and see the store manager. And he'd say, Hey, see this, you got to fix this, you got to do this, fix this, do

this. And then he just like I'm bark at them, like, fix this, do this, fix this, and then go to the next store, and you do the same thing. And he said, I have never worked so hard in my life. And you know what, it didn't work. I was struggling and the stores weren't getting better. He said I had my personal hit Bob, bottom day, when I realized there were people on the teams and the stores they were quitting and I didn't even know what their names were. And he realized he needed to change his approach. And so this is what he did. He got some mentoring, and then he shifted his strategy. So on the outside, some things were the same every morning you get up. He pulled out the hotlist, but he wouldn't circle what was in red and played, just take a look at it. And then he would drive to the first or let's say, the first store manager was Maria, he'd say, hey, Maria. Good morning, happy Monday, how was your weekend? What'd you do this weekend. And then he started to talk. And then after a while after talking and connecting, he say, Maria, here's the hotlist from this morning, here's the information, what do you think we should do? And then he let whoever it was that you write, speak, and then together, they co create a strategy together. And what he found was when he started doing all of this, the numbers, the performance started to go up and up, and up and up. And what he said he learned was, that the secret to hitting the numbers was to stop focusing on the numbers first, instead of us to start to focusing on the people because it's those people that are hitting the numbers. And so what Matt story really demonstrates are what I call the three secrets to building strong leaders, and they are connection, communication, and collaboration. So first, what connection because I don't care what industry you work in, whether it's retail, or pharmaceuticals, or manufacturing or high tech, we're all in the people business, and you're all having to connect with another live human being. So first, it's about connection. So how are you doing that? And obviously, empathy is the gateway drug of connection. Right? Without that, and all the studies would say that, like the number one thing is that, you know, do people feel valued and cared for is what makes them most engaged in performance, you know, and then think about it valued and cared for sounds like the softest and fuzziest thing ever. But it's so true, because it's the thing about because we're human, we're wired to connect, we're wired for empathy, we're wired to belong. And so connection is the first one communication.

Maria Ross 26:45

I'm gonna I'm gonna interrupt you first. Yeah, sure. We go to the other two. Yeah. So with connection, the rebuttal you often hear to that is, but I'm not that type of person. So if I go and start asking people, how was their day? How was their weekend? We're both going to know it feels fake and false. Yeah. What would you say to somebody to say, here's how you can actually create an authentic connection with somebody? And does it start with just rote questions, and eventually, that becomes your mechanism?

Alain Hunkins 27:15

Look everything at people usually I find when they say that I don't do this. They've given it like, all of two seconds of practice. Like, I can't do this. I know. I asked a question once, but didn't answer me. Right. So.

Maria Ross 27:27

So forget it. Yeah. This connection thing? And

Alain Hunkins 27:30

it's also again, here you are, you're judging yourself, based on how it feels to you on the inside? Or do you actually have feedback from the outside of how it feels? You actually know that? And so what I saw, I say is, I think try it, right? Try it for 30 days, like a percent, you know, try this first, you know, and if you don't start with, like, how are you feeling? And find an open ended question about work, that you could actually probe and get a sense of their input. And then I always say, listen, and I put a little asterisk after listen, and I put the an asterisk means then shut up and let them keep talking, right? Because some people listen, actually

Maria Ross 28:07

listen to the answer. Yeah. Yeah. I love it. Okay, so I wanted to interject on that. I know that that's a pain point for people. So totally, one is connection. Second is communication,

Alain Hunkins 28:18

communication. And so here's the thing about communication. There's often big barriers between what people mean, and what they say. And what we hear, right? So those three are should be all aligned. Think of like, Do you ever go to a carnival day pay or something, you know, the Midway when they have that ring toss, but you want to get all three rings in perfect alignment. But you realize how hard that is actually to do. Because oftentimes, what I mean isn't what I say. And what I say isn't what you hear. And so we have to constantly go back and clarify. And the reason that getting to the point of communication isn't communication, that's the trap. It's like, well, I have to communicate better. No, communications goal is not communication, the goal of communication is shared understanding. And why that is so important is because shared understanding is the platform on which you are going to take all future action. So if you have a solid foundation, understanding, guess what, you're gonna make some good decisions, you're gonna get some good results. But if you have some shoddy understanding, like I'm not quite sure what they mean, but I didn't check. So let's go off. And we all have those meetings after the meetings. And hey, Maria, what do you think we just decided that I don't know what do you and we have 10 different versions of reality, and then 10 Different people going off in different directions. So anyway, I like to tell leaders that you should assume that the default setting for human communication is misunderstanding not understanding but miss, and then make sure you're putting scaffolding to shore up to make sure you're getting confirmation of what it is. Because it's too important not to it's too important not to right so you all know the carpenters Maxim, right, measure twice, cut once. So in we have to like think of communication before we take action, which is the cutting, the measuring is the back and forth. It's all that back and forth of how we're dealing with that. So that's the second secret. And the third secret is around collaboration. So when it comes to Collaboration, it's up to leaders to design environments where people can work at their best. And in my research, I found that there's four key elements that need to be in place for people to perform at their best, which is for them to be most engaged, and as productive as possible. And the four things are safety, people need to feel safe, obviously, physically safe, but also psychologically and emotionally safe, right. And we can get into more detail on that if we have time. That's the first one. The next one is that people have to feel energy that certain environments are going to energize people, other environments are going to drain them to a greater or lesser extent. So what is the leader are you doing to create environments where people can be energized, I'll give you a quick example, how many of us have been to a meeting that was scheduled for two or three hours, and the person running the meeting has now gone an hour and 45 minutes, and we still have not taken a break. I mean, it's something as

simple as that. Right? Another example, that even closer to home that people can relate to is how many of us have our meetings scheduled, your nine o'clock meeting goes right until 10, which starts your 10 o'clock meeting goes till 11, etc, etc. That all works fine on paper and for Outlook might not work for human beings, human being to the point from

Maria Ross 31:04

earlier is we're not giving each other the space. That's actually one of the best ways to ground yourself so that you can be present and actually maintain empathy for someone else and be clear headed enough to take on someone's point of view is put some buffers in your calendar for crying out loud, like don't be going next, because you're going to be in the one meeting, worried about if you're going to get to the next meeting in time.

Alain Hunkins 31:28

And we've all been there, right? And the thing is, what it creates is a certain sense of franticness. And what happens is our prefrontal cortex goes offline, we're just like, and we're kind of in this slightly whacked out fight or flight or freeze mode, like what's happening and just trying to catch up and, and we wonder, like, what is actually getting done? And how many of us have gone through those days were like meeting after meeting after meeting at the end of the day, like, what did I actually get done today? I was incredibly busy. I'm exhausted, I'm drained. And yet, what the heck do we actually discuss do what was significant? Did we move anything forward today? Exactly. So yeah, so energy, that's we got safety with energy. The third one is around ownership, right? Giving people a sense that people need autonomy, right? No one wants to be led by a micromanager are so how can you give people a clear what they need to do? But you know, in terms of the goals and outcomes, but give them some flexibility and parameters on how they can bring their own creativity and how they go about doing it? Because just because you do it a certain way, doesn't mean they should do it certain way, because they're not, you know, which is the whole

Maria Ross 32:24

tension between hybrid remote work, it's, you know, so millions of people realize they can actually do their jobs really well. Yeah, not being in an office. And for leaders who only know how to lead people if they can see them. That's the inherent tension. So you're not giving me the flexibility to do my best work for you. If you're going to mandate that I have to do it in an office when I actually know about myself, I'm more productive and focused, if I get to work from home, and I don't have to do a two hour commute to get to work. And so it all comes down for me, all of what you're saying is coming back to this idea of Do you want your company to make money? Do you want your company to hit its performance targets? Do you want to be profitable? Do you want to be sustainable? If so, you've got to let people thrive. You've got to let people as your assets quote unquote, do their best work. It's an it just drives me up a tree when I hear that that's fluffy. That's, that's, you know, pandering to them. That's this that's that. If they don't do the work, you have no company.

Alain Hunkins 33:27

Yeah. Yeah, it's like get on the human bandwagon. And don't don't just give it lip service. And I think there's too many leaders are like, hey, if we just wink, wink, nudge, nudge, and it's going to be our way through this, like, yeah, people are our greatest asset. So it says in a big, glossy poster on the wall,

yeah, whatever. Everyone's sniffed that stuff out. And people are just, and things like, and I think we are at this amazing inflection point, host pandemic, right? Because everyone's had this taste, where it's like, you know, what, I when the chips were down, and you needed me to be autonomous and responsible, I did it. I showed up. And I was great. To Who are you to tell me that I have to come back in now two or three days a week? Because you say so, you know, and then you know, and people will come up and they'll say, oh, but you understand, like, we're missing out on the water cooler chat. And this, there's no data that shows that people are any more innovative or productive this way. I think what would be much, much more honest, if the leaders would have said, hey, you know what, folks, I need you back in the office two or three days a week, and this is why I have really high control needs, and I just feel a lot better if you're here next to me. I mean, I think people like got it, boss, I'm sure. Okay, I understand. Thank you. Right. Okay, I can that's honest. Like, that's what so often it is, or there may be some other things going on. Like we spent all this money on the real estate, commercial real estate we have to show who knows what the reasons are? Yeah, yeah. So all of which I think we're in heated agreement that autonomy, people need their autonomy, right? Ownership flex.

Maria Ross 34:47

Well, they cite in many studies that flexibility is their most important desire of of a workplace environment of a culture to make a job desirable for them. The number one thing is flexibility.

Alain Hunkins 34:57

Yeah, yeah, exactly. And then therefore Arthritis purpose, right? The sense that people feel that what they do matters that they're contributing to something more than just a paycheck. It's not just a job, they feel like, you know, because what we know is that when people are connected to something that's greater than themselves, they bring more of themselves and they perform better. They just do. Right. And so what are you doing to remind people of that, and not it's not enough just on orientation day, to show them your last year's annual report and say, Read this? You know, it's like, I like to say, it's like telling your beloved on your wedding day that you love them. It's like, well, I said, on our wedding day, I mean, nothing's changed. Right? I have to say it again. Come on, like, No, you need to remind people of the purpose on a regular and frequent face. Absolutely. So those are the secrets, connection, communication, and collaboration.

Maria Ross 35:41

I love it. I love it. So I want to get back to I have two more questions for you. I want to get back to this idea about communication. Because I'm a stickler about this. I, from a very young age, I have been convinced that most of our problems in the world are due to lack of a lack of effective communication, that we could avoid issues at work, we could avoid interpersonal issues, if we communicated better, but unfortunately, I'm going to date myself here. We live in a world that's like an episode of Three's Company, where it's someone overhear something, and then they make assumptions. And then they spend the whole episode trying to figure out what the real story is, right. And I have been told in the past by managers that I can be too literal, because I will repeat back several times to make sure I understand that we could have a whole other episode as to why I'm like that from a past leadership failure. But I actually would rather err on the side of over communicating to ensure that we're on the same page, and to the point that when I'm in groups that are not work related, if it's like the parent teacher board, or like another group, I'm actually the one I can't help myself, I step in, and I go, I think

you guys are misunderstanding each other. I think what I hear her saying is x, but what you think she's saying is why and then they go Oh, and everybody laughs and then they figure it out? Yeah. Why? What are our obstacles to communicating? Well, like, why is aside from probably we're moving too fast? Assuming that might be one of them. That is, what are some of the other obstacles we have? And how can we overcome them so that we can communicate better, literally just message transmission, better sender received better?

Alain Hunkins 37:14

Totally, totally. So there's a few things that are kind of are not working in our favor as human beings that get in the way, we talked about it already a little bit. It's that sense of the difference between what I say what I mean, when I hear, right, so I may mean something, but the way in which I communicate it is not actually what I mean, which of course, then then leaves you having to interpret it through your own filter. So that is a huge piece already. Alright, and connected to that. The second one is this bias that we have, which is called the projection bias is like, and how many of us have ever said something like, well, I sent the email, they should know what to do, right? Because we think just because we've communicated that it's now done. It's not done. It's a you've communicated it one way. But if you think about it, it needs to be two way where you have to confirm the receipt of that. And in fact, one thing I coached leaders, I'll share a little tool that hopefully the listeners will find really useful. I calling it asking for a receipt, if you stop and think about this idea of receipts, right? What are receipts receipts are confirmation of a completed transaction. So when you buy something, it's a transaction. And when you want proof of that transaction, you ask for a receipt. Now obviously, the more important the transaction, the greater likelihood, you ask for a receipt. So for example, you will go to the local convenience store, you want a pack of chewing gum for 79 cents, you might not need that receipt, whatever, it's fine. But I can guarantee you, you would never buy a house or a car without getting a receipt, right? So then when the stakes are high. And so there's a great anecdote that comes out of the fast food industry. So you might remember this I certainly do the beginnings of in the early 1980s is when all the fast food franchises started putting drive throughs in, right and so when they first put in the drive throughs to all the fast food restaurants, the first few months, the processor clock across the board was a nightmare. It's very common people would order things and they drive up to the counter and you know, the window, I should say the window to pick up their food and be filled with mistakes. And this was across every single thing. And so that went on for months and months and then suddenly drive through mistake rates just started to plummet. And what was the what was the new technology? What did they change? It was so simple. What happened was they realized, Oh, we've been getting one way communication and acting on one way communication. What if we do this, what they started doing is having all the employees repeat the order back to the customer before they started to make it let's say although this use McDonald's, I'm not playing favorites here, but it's like, okay, you choke to McDonald's. I like to get to Big Macs to medium fries and too small, whatever. So it is the habit, McDonald's these days. Um, okay, and so that they go back, right. So you want to Big Macs to medium fries and two Cokes, right? Yes. Got it. Okay, and guess what? So it's asking for a receipt. And the thing is, it doesn't take much time. Now I've talked to leaders and I've talked to like senior executives like I don't know like a CEOs have said, I don't know if I asked my my C suite at our meetings to like, go around. room and ask for a seat like, What is everyone walking out of here? They're gonna think like, I'm treating them like kids. Like, was that you are? Is that them? Okay? Because the fact is, if it's it look, if Taco Bell will invest in this technology for a 99 cent taco supreme, don't you think your million and billion dollar strategies are

worth the same level of clarity? mean? So it's just we have to get over that ego when they say, I don't know if that's an ego talk? Yeah, yeah, that is such ego, it's

Maria Ross 40:25

gonna be unhappy that you prevented them from wasting a bunch of time and effort. Because you took five seconds to clarify what the marching orders were. Yeah,

Alain Hunkins 40:34

and this you just named the third big challenge that I think that we have around communication is that we live in a world where leaders think the ultimate pinnacle is efficiency, whatever we can do to be more efficient. And we sometimes confuse efficiency with effectiveness. And sometimes an advertiser's know this really well, how many times do you need to hear a message before it sticks? Right? Eight 910? Whatever it is, we need to repeat ourselves often and frequently and confirm like, what did you get? Did I get this? Did I get that and to be vigilant around working to shore in all the misunderstanding to get back to a point of clarity. And so we have to do these things, we have to recognize that the default setting for human communication is misunderstanding, like I said, and so how can we create clarity, and don't let efficiency get in the way of effectiveness and the same the and the other piece around this around challenges to communication is that people are just swimming in information overload. So another example, let's say I have 10, direct reports. And I have a really important project. And I need their ownership. And they're in there. And they're all going to lead teams. And so the most efficient thing for me to do is to send an email to all 10. Like, hey, and here's the subject, this is what I need you to do, boo, boo, boo, boom, done, right? send one email to 10 people, scale is great, right? I just efficiently communicate that out. However, if I really need their commitment, and engagement and buy in over this important project, I'm probably better served having one on one meetings and talking to each of them, and creating a relationship of connection and communication and collaboration. So that I know when they walk out of there, they are ready to rock and roll. Right. And so if you think I don't have the time, it goes back to what we said before, are you willing to invest the time because a little bit of time from a leader goes so far for the people that are wanting to follow them. And I think we forget the power of that those little moments doesn't have to be a lot of those little moments to make things happen.

Maria Ross 42:26

Great stuff. I'm going to ask you one last question. Before we wrap up quickly is it's a little bit of looking backward. But I want to leave on a positive note looking forward. And that is how did we get to the point that employees have such low confidence in their leaders? And what can we do to turn it around? Or what is being done to turn it around? Yeah,

Alain Hunkins 42:46

I mean, we got to this place, because we unfortunately have this inherited leadership legacy, where basically, we have a lot of 21st century knowledge work, workplace leaders, bleeding with an industrial age mindset, there's still leading as the commander in chief, right, and people don't want the commander in chief what they really want. They want facilitators in chief, right? We need people who can make things easy for us, we live in a very complex world. And so that's kind of how we got here, in terms of what can we do moving forward is to realize that we live in an age of incredible opportunity for

all sorts of whether it's for employees, for leaders, for organizations, for society, we live in this time and opportunity, where if we choose, we can lean into being exceptionally human. Right? And what I mean by that is, what does it mean to be an exceptionally human leader, it means to be someone who was masterful at connecting, communicating, and collaborating. And if you take care of those things, and start with the people side of connection, communication and collaboration, then the results will start to take care of themselves. So kind of like Matt story, we got to flip the focus, make it less about the work and more about the people because it's the people, the ones that are actually doing the work. And if you're in a leadership role, it is not your not your job to be an excellent Doer anymore. You've been promoted beyond doer, you are now a leader of doers are a leader of leader, a leader of doers, depending on how many levels up you are. So I'd say the most important thing is to continue to lean into being an exceedingly exceptional human being. And I like to say that all leadership development is personal development, and all personal development is leadership. Because whether or not you have the job title, we all lead every single day. We certainly lead ourselves, we lead our families around, we lead our kids, our parents, our friends all over and so these skills are going to make for better workplaces, but they're going to make for better families and ultimately, ultimately a better world. I

Maria Ross 44:48

love that we all have that sphere of influence whether we're officially a leader or not. And how we show up in that space is going to be a model for everyone around us of oh I can find success. Is that way by being a very human leader and a human centered leader? Allah, this was so wonderful. Thank you for all your insights. The book, again is called the leadership code three secrets to building strong leaders highly recommend folks pick that up and take a look. And we'll have all your links in the show notes including a link to a 30 day leadership challenge that you are offering. But for folks on the go right now or exercising or walking, where can they learn more about you and your work?

Alain Hunkins 45:26

Well, first of all, well done you for exercising and walking or whatever. Because we're not Yeah, we're sitting here having a nice chat. So go to my website, you can find all things leadership related. Is Atlanta Huggins. I'm gonna spell that for you. It's a l a i n. Allah Huggins, H U N. K I N s.com. There are links to my book there, there's links to my articles, etc, lots of resources. And yeah, if I can be of any support, please do reach out. And feel free to connect with me on LinkedIn as well. That is my social media of choice.

Maria Ross 45:55

Thank you so much for your time and your insights today. It was a great conversation.

Alain Hunkins 46:00

Thank you. I really appreciate it really enjoyed our conversation too.

Maria Ross 46:04

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