



Guest

David has been teaching the landmark Interpersonal Dynamics course (informally called as Touchy Feely by many) at Stanford for over 50 years. He has distilled some of his learnings and insight from these five decades in a recently published book titled – Connect: Building Exceptional Relationships with Family, Friends and Colleagues. It is always a pleasure to speak to somebody who has spent decades honing a certain craft.

We start with discussing the six markers of an exceptional relationship, then move on to talking about the criticality of the right language, then we talk about the notion of crossing the net, something that is possibly at the root of a large part of the misunderstanding between humans. This is one of those things that is so simple and can have such a transformational impact on our lives if we can apply it consistently. We then talk about how we can build the interpersonal muscle with kids and the right kind of vulnerability that we should consider showing at our work place. This conversation could be relevant for anybody who is working with people, which practically means all of us!

Context to the conversation

Welcome to the 97th conversation at the Play to Potential Podcast, a series of reflective conversations from leading people from various domains on three broad themes – Leadership, Transitions and Careers. Just like businesses think about where to play and how to win in the context of their strategy, we all think about the two questions – where to go and how to grow at various points in our lives. These questions become that much harder in a world of abundance, multiplicity of options and limited feedback. Through this podcast, I hope to share some insights that might help you navigate these questions in a more thoughtful way.

While podcasting accounts for 10-20% of my time and effort, my primary vocation is that of an Executive Coach and a Discreet Sounding Board with CEOs/Entrepreneurs. I engage with leaders and organizations with a growth mindset and help them play to their unique potential. You can learn more about the podcast and my work at www.playtopotential.com.

My guest this time is David Bradford. David has been teaching the landmark Interpersonal Dynamics course at Stanford for over 50 years. He has distilled some of his learnings and insight from these five decades in a recently published book titled – Connect: Building Exceptional Relationships with Family, Friends and Colleagues. It is always a pleasure to speak to somebody who has spent decades honing a certain craft. The audio quality in the conversation is a little So-So but hope you will be able to look past that to reflect on some of the wisdom he shares. We start with discussing the six markers of an exceptional relationship, then move on to talking about the criticality of the right language, then we talk about the notion of crossing the net, something that is possibly at the root of a large part of the misunderstanding between humans. This is one of those things that is so simple

and can have such a transformational impact on our lives if we can apply it consistently. We then talk about how we can build the interpersonal muscle with kids and the right kind of vulnerability that we should consider showing at our work place.

This conversation could be valuable to anybody who deals with other people in their lives. Which makes it all of us. It is such a relevant topic for all of us and there is so much nuance in every aspect of interpersonal relationships. David, with his decades of experience, brings a lot of nuance and subtlety that I found really helpful. Some of the distinctions he makes are really clarifying. Hope you find it as valuable as I did.

Let's listen and learn from David Bradford.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): David, thank you so much for making the time on the Play to Potential podcast. Really excited to be talking to someone like you who spent decades studying this topic of interpersonal relationships.

David Bradford (DB): I am glad to be here; I am looking forward to this.

DJ: David, before we get into the book that you have recently co-authored, I am curious about people's journeys in this podcast. You have spent five decades teaching this course at Stanford. Can you talk to us a little bit about the arc of your career. It seems like you stayed in one place for a long time, but I am sure you have reinvented yourself several times over in these five decades. Can you talk to us a little bit about the arc of your journey over the last several years?

DB: Yes, I was recruited to come to Stanford to develop this course and much of the first 30 years was in developing it, getting other faculty growing. It is now the most popular MBA elective in the school; over 85% of the students take it. And I think the arc has been understanding the complexity of interpersonal relations and figuring out how this can work with different people from different countries from different backgrounds and having it apply not only to a work situation but also to personal relationships. So, it has been a process of continual discovery and continual learning for myself.

DJ: And what sorts of things have you said no to David? I am sure as this course got popular, as the word spread, you would have gotten your share of offers and opportunities. I am curious about how you have stayed on this path.

DB: I think I have... I haven't been very tempted to leave this path because it is so personally rewarding. I think the other options have been secondary. I started a professional organization on experiential teaching but that never took me away from this course and I turned that over to other people. And I have done some consulting, but in a certain sense the consulting was largely taking the learnings from this course and applying it to executives and senior executives. So, any sort of other activities have been related to this and I have never been tempted to get off this path that has been, as I said, very personally rewarding not only because of what I could discover but also what I could learn about myself.

DJ: Wow, that's such a... it is such a refreshing thought especially in a world today where we are looking at people moving jobs every two years, three years, five years. So, to find somebody who has really gone deep it is really inspiring so...

DB: But what I would add Deepak is that I feel I have been moving but I wouldn't define it as moving between institutions or between fields, but it has been moving more broadly within this area. So, every year has felt new.

DJ: How have you, may be staying with this David, how have you thought about staying relevant in refreshing yourself? Is that something that one has to be a lot more deliberate about, especially when you are in one institution or has that been an organic process and you have let your curiosity lead your way?

DB: Well, I think I have always been curious but one of the exciting things about this course is that the instructor learns as much as the students do. This is not something that I do to the students, I do it with the students. And as the students give feedback to each other, I get a lot of feedback myself. And so, it is not necessarily a process of how do I force myself to learn. It's I think that I would have to work hard not to learn.

DJ: In a way that captures the essence of how I feel during some of my coaching conversations, right? It has been such a rewarding journey just to be in a position to help leaders and by extension help oneself by observing that journey and feedback from them so...

DB: And they actually pay you for that.

DJ: That's true.

DB: For your own personal development.

DJ: True, that's a privilege indeed. Diving into your book, David, your book talks about a special type of relationship that you call exceptional and you say there are six hallmarks to exceptional relationships. Can you sort of talk to us about what you mean by exceptional and the six hallmarks?

DB: Yes. First of all, let me say that relationships are in a continuum. We have some that are casual, we have some that are more, have deeper connection to them, we have some that are quite strong and we have those that are intimate, and at the upper end, we have those that we call exceptional. We say all relationships and certainly exceptional relationships have these six characteristics. The first one is to what extent could I be myself? Can I let you know David that that is relevant to our relationship. I don't share everything with you but what do we need in order to build a connection? And also, can I not have to present an image, present something that I am not, which I think is very relevant to certainly to teachers who do a lot of image projection and to leaders as well who often walk around saying if I am to be a leader, I have to present something other than I am. And so, what we look at is to what extent can I let you know David in a relevant way. The second thing is, since we are talking about relationship, can I do things that help you be better known as you are and we all do things that shut down other people and can we be aware of that and not do that and can we encourage the other person's also personal self-disclosure. Now, letting yourself be known each of us also means that we become vulnerable. We share some things that the other might not approve of. So, the third dimension is can I trust that what I share won't be used against me. And that's of course relevant in organizations because information gets passed around quickly in organizations and I don't want to share something that is going to hurt my career or hurt my effectiveness. But also, it relates to this relationship. Am I going to say something where you will judge me negatively

and may even reject me. The fourth dimension is can we be honest with each other? Honesty isn't sharing everything but it is sharing what is most important for us to relate and to do work together. And can you have confidence that what I am telling you is what I really mean and what's most important and you don't have to read between the lines. Fifth, any relationship, and I have been married for 55 years, any relationship has glitches to it, has problems, has disagreements, has even conflict. That's true to all relationships and can we in this relationship raise those, not only resolve them but resolve them in a way that might deepen the relationship. And finally, we say, we find that relationships have the quality of are we committed to each other's growth and development? If I see you doing things or hurting yourself, am I committed up to you that I will take the risk of saying that. Now, these six dimensions are also on a continuum, and you don't have to be at the very top to be exceptional but you have to be high up on all of them to start to approach those. And the nice thing is about these six is they can give you a clue as to which ones you may want to work on to deepen the present relationships you have.

DJ: And picking on one of the things that caught my attention as you said it David, you talk about resolving conflict in a way that deepens the relationship. Can you say more about what it takes to be able to resolve conflicts in a healthy way which strengthens the relationship?

DB: Yes, a lot depends on how the issue is raised. So, I want to go back to the whole thing of honesty, right, you are somebody who will say well, I am going to be brutally honest, I find they are usually more brutal than they are honest. And this gets into how we define feedback if you can get into if you like to but we find that if you stick with behavioral feedback and I raise issues because I see this not as you being a bad person but as just getting in the way of our working together, being friends together and it is a sign that something is a little wrong. So, the image we use is let's imagine you are driving to work and I know driving in India can be quite challenging having been there, but let's assume that the motor is fluttering a little bit and the steering is a little loose and the wheel seem to be thumping a bit, you don't say bad car, bad car, you say, hmm, something's wrong, I better get it worked on. And we have to have the same sort of orientation when there's a conflict. When there's a conflict, it is not that you are wrong or bad or I am but something is getting in the way and can we sit down jointly and try to figure this out so that leads us into problem solving not into blame or accusation.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman. I love David's point where he says that when people say they are going to be brutally honest, they are often more brutal than honest! So true at many levels.

Of the six markers he speaks about, I want to underscore Point 6 - Being committed to each other's growth and development. Its an interesting one and there is something to be said about being too committed and too eager in the other's growth and development especially when it comes to Couples. This nuance came up in my conversation with Jennifer Petriglieri (JP) of INSEAD who speaks about dual Career Couples and how the spouse can provide a secure base and help the husband or wife grow. But she goes on to say that if we are too eager and too pushy, it can be counter-productive.

JP: *"So the couples who do very well I found are those who flick their model of support from that to a model of support called a secure base. Now secure means three things first it means of course there is that level of comfort that level of support but layer on top of that are another two things. One is an if I can think if there is a loving kick away from a relationship so loving persuade say you know I'll be here to dust you off but you get out there and figure it out so if you aren't sure if you are having this*

existential questions the response is don't worry we will be fine. Its okay gets out there then and figure something else this push to explore a push away from the safety of the relationship away from the comfort zone and into that learning there are not risk zone. Now this a bit counterintuitive because in a relationship when our partner feeling a little bit uncertain and a little bit wobbly our natural instincts just like that with our children is to hold them close is to give them a cuddle you know metaphor and this is quite the opposite when we see our partner struggling with something feeling a little bit unsure instead of pulling them close we actually push them away and in a loving way and to its quite a different model of support but the third thing about a secure base is also a very arm's length support so it's not about interfering it's not about did you call that head hunter, did you read that book did you go to that networking event that really unhelpful so it's a real arm's length push away and what I found in couples was when they could both do this for each other when they could both provide the secure base that's when the magic happened because what happened was both partner could then go out and do the work the experimentation, exploration and reflection that all of us need to do to get to your transition and both felt very supported in that and both could get to the other side and I think you know when we first started talking about the second transition I said this could be a time of incredible growth for people in their career is a relationship and this growth really stands from this secure base support at the root of our relationship."

DJ: Back to David's sixth point, I feel it is critical to commit to each other's development but I feel it is as critical to do it in a constructive way. Let's now get back to the conversation with David Bradford.

DJ: Let's talk about feedback David, I think, as I read your book this whole notion of over the net really caught my attention. I think, when I was at McKinsey, we were taught the SBI model of feedback: Situation Behavior Impact in the way you sort of communicate feedback. But I love the metaphor of playing a racket sport across the net and not crackling. You have heard commentators say you can only control your side of the net. I really love the way you sort of map that to the process of feedback. So, can you sort of bring that to life for us this notion of over the net and not crossing the net?

DB: Yes. We start with the assumption, in fact, we say this in the book, Carole and I believe you can say almost anything to almost anybody if you stick with your reality. In fact, we add after two glasses of wine, we drop the almost because sort of in our heart of hearts think you can say anything to anybody if you stick with your reality. But being academics, we cover ourselves. So, what do we mean by three realities? In interacting, I only know two realities and you know two realities. So, let's take Deepak you and me. Reality number one is my motives, intentions which leads to my behavior. Reality number two, my words, my nonverbals, my tone etcetera. The third reality is the impact on you, how does it affect you? So, the model is similar to the McKinsey model but we, I think, elaborate little differently and what we say is I know two realities. My motives and I can see the behavior, you know two realities, you can see the behavior and you know the effect on you. But you don't know my motives and I don't know the impact, but I need to know the impact if I am to be effective. So, we then envision a... and we actually envision two tennis nets, but I am going to talk about one. The first one is between my intentions, motives and intentions and my behavior. The second net is between behavior and your effect, but let me focus on the first. As in tennis, you can't play in the other person's backcourt, we often get into trouble so frequently and conflict gets worse because you the recipient of my behavior don't stay on your side of the court. So, think of how much feedback is so commonly used in organizations. We say to somebody else, will you just still want to be a team player, you just want to push your own area, you don't care about me or my area, you just want to dominate. Well, you are over the net because you are making statements about my motives and intentions that you don't know. It is a story you are making up. And so, when we say stick with your reality you could say anything. Let's imagine that you are now feeling a little tuned out because

you are experiencing me as giving you more information than you want. So, if you were to say, well, David, you just want to show how smart you are, I am going to get defensive, but the other problem with that is I can just say no, I don't and it has little impact. But if you stick with your reality and you say David, I am feeling bothered and I am feeling a little tuned out because I am experiencing you as going on and on and talking too much. Now, I can't say no, you don't but I am over your net. I am likely to say, well, I am sorry, that's not my intention, and I am trying to be helpful. And you can say, well, I am glad you are trying to be helpful and I would like you to be helpful but the way you are now acting isn't helpful to me. And now we can have a conversation of how I can be helpful. And so much of conflict is accusations, making up these stories and people not sticking with what they knew, no, which is this is how I feel, this is how your behavior is impacting me. And this is how it is interfering with our relationship.

DJ: And staying with that, if I may David, and staying with that tennis rally that you just sort of outlined, you sort of spoke about staying on the same side of the net and what would be crossing the net. Is there something around the how we come across the emotional state, the regulation, the listening; can you sort of paint a little bit of context around the manner in which we frame these responses?

DB: Well, the better the relationship the more variance we can have, but I think that I don't have to be super careful or pussyfoot around as you say in the States. So, I am not experiencing this, so I am going to make this up Deepak, so please. So, I think, if you did some stuff that bothered me, I think, I could say, hey Deepak, come on, I am really feeling bothered about what you are doing and it is getting in the way of this interview. I think, I can be forceful like that. I am talking about myself, I am bothered. And it is hurting me and so when you are concerned about the relationship it's hurting you too. That's very different than me attacking you or making suppositions about your motives or intentions.

DJ: Got it. Got it.

DB: And I want to stress this because you don't have to be so careful and so nice particularly if my concern is for you as well as me and for the relationship. If I am really, if something is getting in the way of us working together, I can say Hey, I am really upset about what's going on. And you are like, you will say, what is it? If I can stick with the behavior and how it is impacting you. Now, I am going to come back to the whole notion of self-disclosure. One of the ways we tend to protect ourselves is not to let ourselves be vulnerable. Now, we have to be careful about vulnerability, but if we are interacting it often helps. If I am feeling hurt or if I am feeling put down or if I am feeling envious, just say it. If I could say, hey Deepak, I really felt hurt by that. Now, the worst thing you could say, which I don't think you would is well, that's your problem, David, and I will say no, I say that doesn't help me, hurts still a bit more, but it hurts both of us, it is not just my problem as this is a consequence. And you see how honest a conversation we could have this way if we each stick with our reality.

DJ: And building on that David, you have been bringing this to students across 50 years. It is one of those things where it is easy to get it conceptually in the head. In your experience what are the common places where people often trip up in bringing this to life in their respective tennis courts?

DB: Well, let me first say you are absolutely right; it's easier conceptually to get it but to do it. And in fact, not infrequently, my wife says to me with exasperation you teach this stuff, why don't you do it? Because one of the problems is we all act like, well first of all, we protect ourselves and in protecting ourselves we try not to be vulnerable. But secondly, we try to understand the other person so we psych them out. So, we so quickly go to makeup stories. So, if you were to do

something three times in a row it is sort of natural for me to say what sort of person is Deepak to do that. And then I am starting to make a story and as soon as I make a story, I am going to accuse you of it. Well, Deepak, aren't you doing that just because I am alone. And what we forget is the story I make up is my story; I don't know it. And not only that it is unnecessary. As my wife says, gee, I really was hurt when you said that, you are likely to share your attention. You are likely to say oh, I didn't mean that, I was just starting to get impatient and da da da da... so I don't have to make up the story but we do it so naturally.

DJ: And a related question here, David is very often when you are in the heat of a moment of an interaction, very often we aren't mindful of how we are coming across, you know, a lot of let's say the if we stick with this metaphor of the net, I would imagine some of the stuff that transpires is often in the blind spot of that person; I don't even know that I am doing this. Any reflections on that just in terms of tuning in to what's going on?

DB: Well, I'll answer that in a minute, but I think the bigger problem is we often don't know what we feel. And I think we need to start being aware of our feelings and not infrequently when Carole and I work with each other and we get into our own disagreements, one of us will say, wait a minute, I am not sure I know what I am feeling and we stop and we sort of ask ourselves, I am wondering what I did. So, that's the major problem. When you are talking about blind spots, one of the interesting things about this mode of interaction is if we can get into a conversation, I am likely to discover my blind spots. So, let's say, and again I am making this up, you are not giving me enough real data that I can use, you are too nice. So, I am going to make this up. So, let's assume that you have done something that's really bothering me. I say, hey Deepak, I really feel hurt by that and so on. And you say, Gee, I am sorry and then you might say, see what's interesting David is this is the third time that you said that, I wonder what's going on. Well, that might get me to reflect. You are not telling me what you think is going on because you realize you don't know but you are puzzled, you say David, what's going on. And I might say, oh, what I have realized is that I can say I tend to get competitive particularly with men. So, I am learning something, I am not only learning the impact of my behavior but I am learning something about me. So, I don't have to have it all figured out. What we say is if you know your feelings and you could identify the behavior you are 90% there.

DJ: Let's talk about that David. We are all taught language in a formal way. English, the alphabet, the grammar. Tell us a little bit about the vocabulary of emotions, you know, where do we start and what's a good place for us to get a sense of what the wheel of emotions looks like. Is there an approach that you suggest for people to start building that vocabulary?

DB: Like it's two things. One is, we would say well, buy the book and then the appendix is a long list of emotions but that's not nearly as helpful as what is really helpful is as you go through the day stop and say, I wonder what I am feeling; we almost always are feeling something. Usually, it is at such a low level it doesn't register unless somebody cuts us off the road and we get into anger. But if you start to do that, you will start to say, hmm, I am feeling a little worried about this upcoming meeting, hmm, I am really feeling looking forward to meeting with my colleague. Hmm, I am really hoping that and now you are starting to be more in touch with those low-level feelings which often aren't low level but are ones that we have pushed down because we sort of have been trained beware of feelings, leave feelings out of it, emotions have no place, but emotions are everywhere.

DJ: And at some level this requires a certain level of mindfulness, is that the right way to frame it to observe ourselves to observe the others? What do you suggest to leaders?

DB: Can I... let me break in?

DJ: Please.

DB: What I would really stress is mindfulness about ourselves. Mindfulness about others gets us into story making up. We may want be observer of others, gee, that person went silent, that person seemed to frown. Can we observe their behavior and responses but not be mindfulness about I wonder what's going on with them because that leads you down a dark rabbit hole of the stories you are making up. Now I cut you all.

DJ: No problem, actually what you just said triggered another question, David. Sometimes in life it is very often about building trust with a set of people whether it is professional relationships, personal relationships, and there at least correct me if I am wrong David, I feel that you start building trust only when you sort of have some sense of the other person's intent, which often you start getting a sense of based on continued behavior from a person. How do you, you know, back to your point about observing people's behavior and resisting the urge to form stories versus the need to start curating the world if I may so that we know who we can trust, who we don't trust, do you see a tension there somewhere?

DB: Not as much. First of all, I think it helps to, at least, I find personally I take the orientation, I will trust you until you prove otherwise rather than you have to prove your trust because the latter gets me into a suspicious mode which doesn't help to build openness in our interaction. So, I am going to start with our orientation doesn't mean that I am going to trust you with everything and you are my wallet or my bank account. But I am going to be willing to be more open and evolving, that's the first thing that I will do. The more that I disclose, the more you are likely to trust me and you disclose. So, I may not need to do much inquiry because you may be saying that I am signalling, I want to be open and you are going to feel, you are going to hopefully reciprocate. But I think the other thing is, if there is some things which start to become problematic, our first tendency is to make up that story, hmm, hmm, Deepak is certainly this sort of person. Can I get into curiosity, can I say, Deepak, you said something that puzzled me and I have got to say bothered me a little bit. Well, hopefully trust by you is going up because I am being honest. And you know that I am going to be telling you when I am a little bothered. I am going to say what's going on and you are going to tell me and I might say, okay, that's helpful because I was worried it might be something else which I would have some trouble with. And you see I am continuing to disclose. I am disclosing that I was bothered, I was unhappy. I also expressed an interest in you, I wanted to know you. I didn't try and play prosecuting attorney. So, you know I would like to know what you are doing? And I think the more you do that if you raise the issues that could threaten trust and surface them that actually will build trust.

DJ: I wanted to go back to one of the things you mentioned David in the context of feedback. In the book you also talk about the feedback sandwich and you talk about the limitations of the feedback sandwich where you start with something positive, quickly tick that box and move to the brutal part of the brutally honest thing that you said and then close out with a token positive comment. Can you talk a little bit about how you have observed this and sort of the limitations of this kind of a shallow approach?

DB: It's not the limitations. It's dysfunctional. Anyways. Well, first, there is research to show that when you do that the other person never hears the positive. They are waiting, they know what's coming. So, you are wasting your time. The second thing is you are manipulating the other person. And it doesn't help a relationship to feel manipulated because I am trying to loosen you up with this good compliment. It is also I think insulting. It says, oh you are such a fragile person, I have got to do this. Recently, I was doing another podcast and the person said, my father would say to me Joe, I have a bone to pick with you. That's a wonderful way to start. You are laying out what the issue is and you are owning it, I have a bone to pick. You could say there's something going on that's

bothering me, I am upset at what you are doing; I want to talk about it, or you are doing some stuff, which I think it is hurting you. I am being straightforward about saying there's an issue here and this is the issue which I am involved with, I am bothered, I am worried, I am unhappy. And if you also cannot have built up stories where you have demonized the other, can you say this with the intention even though you are annoyed but you want to be helpful. So, this is why I keep on saying you can be very direct. If I say, again I am making this up, Deepak, I am really bothered on what you are doing and this is hurting us and I think it is hurting you. I don't have to soften you up; I am laying out what it is. And then I name the behavior and I say, this is what it is doing to me, it's closing me down, it's making me feel distant from you, it's not getting me to want to share as much as I want to share but we have got to deal with this. I mean, I don't need to say oh you are really, you know, that's really a very handsome set of headsets that you have got on and oh by the way I don't have to do that nonsense.

DJ: And just maybe the last, sorry...

DB: And let me, if I may, there is a final cost to the feedback sandwich and that is it delegitimizes positive feedback. Often people don't know the full impact of what they do well and we don't do a good job of that either. We say to somebody, nice job. Well, that's useless, it makes the other person feel warm and fuzzy but what was nice about that job. Again, you have to be behavioral specific. It is much more helpful to say, Deepak, the way you handled that meeting was really good, I really liked it because you answered the questions in very succinct forms. You spoke to the other person's concerns, you were well organizing your presentation, whatever it is. If it is behaviorally specific, you are going to learn something. And what would it be like if we had organizations where members were committed to each other and when they saw the other person doing something well, without using as a feedback sandwich we go in and say, you know, I want to tell you something, you really did that well and I want to tell you what you did well. Everybody would learn more and we would have stronger relationships.

DJ: And staying with feedback, you know, when it comes to developmental feedback, David, when you have to share that with your colleagues, especially if you are somebody at a position of power and you are talking to one of your subordinates, what have you learnt about doing it well?

DB: Okay, I am also going to want to talk about with your boss, which you can do, but let's stick with your direct report. First of all, if you are known as a leader who is concerned with the development of your direct reports, you are going to be a very desired leader. And we say at Stanford in this course, we steal the hallmark card slogan, we say, I care enough to say the very worst. I think good leaders look for ways they can help develop their direct reports to make them better, which may be to point out what they do well. They may not be fully aware of it but also where they limit themselves. So, I think, that if you as a leader are committed to developing your people as much as they are willing to be developed, the organization benefits, the direct report benefits and you benefit. Now, I think you could also do this with your boss. One of the things to realize with this three-person, three reality model is that you hold crucial information about the other person that they need. Others don't know the impact of their behavior. You know what your boss does that's useful, that's helpful and what your boss does that is not so useful and not so helpful. Now, the question is you have got to be pretty careful about sharing that. But I don't think you have to beat around the bush much. What I do and bosses walk around very frequently complaining. They say, I don't know why people don't speak up, I don't know why people are sitting their hands in the meeting, I don't know why people cannot raise issues with me. And what they are saying is, I am in the dark. I don't know what's going on. Couldn't you say okay boss, that sounds upsetting, I don't know why people are doing that, but I have got a hunch but would you like to hear? Now, your boss may say, hell, no and you just go quiet, but the boss might say what do you think? And then you can

say, well, one of the reasons I think people are careful in meetings and it is why I am careful is it there are times in which you appear to be mad at people. It happened yesterday in the meeting when Simone raised this point, and this is what you said to him. And I saw him go quiet and I think I would have gone quiet too. Your boss is like I say, well, I think he was wrong. Yeah, that's good, we need to know, we do things wrong, but I think it is the way you do it that is causing the problem you are worried about. Can we talk about ways you could raise it. Now, you are on the boss' side and not only that you are the one direct report who is honest with your boss. As bosses walk around wondering what's being kept from them and you are saying, I am not going to keep things from you.

DJ: Fascinating.

DB: Now that's risky and it takes courage. But I don't think in today's world you get very far by playing it safe.

DJ: And I loved one of the quotes in the book David, I am going to quote from the book you say when problems are complex and intertwined things can feel messy. Imagine there's a muddy swamp and you need to cross it to get to the high ground on the other side, at first you carefully look for rocks to step on so that you don't get mud on your shoes but halfway across the rocks end and you have a choice. Do I go on and wade through the swamp or should I just turn around? Can you say more about this phenomenon since you spoke about risk?

DB: Well, let me tell you my experience. So, let's say I am raising an issue, okay, I won't say with say with my wife Eva and who I love dearly and I raise one issue and I say gee honey when you do X, and she says oh, as a matter of fact the reason I do X is because I get really bothered when you do Y, and I say, well, the trouble is that the reason why I do Y is because of I don't know about this and about that and then she says there's that. And all of a sudden what seemed like a very simple piece of feedback is now a pretty muddy swamp because there are at least five different issues all building on each other. And they are probably built to each other because we haven't raised them early enough, very much is frequently a problem with all of us. The temptation at this point is to say, oh, it is nothing and to get turn around and go back away staying on the rocks. And I think what you need to do is you need to say, there's a lot here and it is pretty messy, but let's stick in it and see what all these issues are and rather than using the issues as bludgeons to justify ourselves let's take it apart. And it may be a longer conversation than you expected and it may be a conversation that can't be resolved in one sitting but can we go through the swamp and clean those up? Okay, I see that when I do X, that's how it bothers you and you are saying I lead you to do Y, so what can we do about it? And now, we can get into problem solving. Remember, feedback starts a conversation, it doesn't end it. We wish it would end it, we wish that I could say Deepak, would you do X, this is the impact on me and you say, yes, I have got it, that's it and we walk away. And there are some issues like that but in most cases, it is intertwined and we need to work it out and problem solve various ways of doing it. And what we say is, can you take the risk of sticking in there, not getting into the blame game, but focus on behavior and the impact on you?

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman. I am reminded of my conversation with Jennifer Goldman Wetzler (JGW), a lady who has studied conflict habits in some detail and rigour. She says that people often gravitate towards four default modes of conflict. It is helpful to understand our default preference and ensure that it doesn't come in the way of a meaningful outcomes.

JGW: *"So there are four conflict habits. One of them is one that I mentioned before which is that some of us in our quest to win a conflict, we might feel competitive and this can be a healthy thing. But when we take it to an extreme and we habitually want to win a conflict, it can get to the point where other people end up experiencing us as blaming them. And so we will kind of go on the attack and blame other people. In contrast, others of us habitually blame ourselves, we may blame and shame ourselves. So again, we may do this with good intentions. So our intention may be to learn from a situation and do better next time. But when we habitually do this, sometimes we end up stewing in our own negative self-talk which does not free us from any kind of conflict whatsoever, it just keeps us stuck in that conflict situation. The third conflict habit is shut-down and that is where we may again well intentionally avoid a conflict situation which can be a helpful way to deal with conflict when, for example, the issue is not that important to you or the person you are dealing with is not that important to you and so avoidance can be useful. But again, when that is the only way that we know how to deal with conflict and we are avoiding issues that are important or were avoiding people whose relationships are important to us, then it becomes an unhealthy way to deal with conflicts. And what typically happens is that the conflict, you know, we will avoid, avoid, avoid, avoid, the conflict is kind of bubbling slowly, simmering, simmering, simmering and then boom, you know, it explodes at a point when we least expected and then we have to go deal with that and we are not prepared. And then finally, one of the other ones that we talked about before is relentlessly collaborate. And that is where we have been taught often like we were saying before from a young age that the way to deal with conflict is to offer other people options, think about what their interests might be, come up with creative solutions, work with them to come up with those creative solutions. And again, that is a really excellent toolbox and skill set to have. And for so many millennia, people did not have that way of thinking about dealing with conflict and we got into all sorts of messes because we did not have that that skill set. But even that, people can get so tied and committed to using this collaborative skill set that we end up pouring energy, time, resources, money into trying to work things out with someone or a group of people who just are not interested in collaborating or cooperating with us."*

DJ: The key takeaway for me is that sometimes avoiding conflict can often lead us to an OK relationship but to take the relationship to the next level, we need to embrace the messiness, engage in the conflict in a healthy manner and then move forward. Knowing our conflict preferences can help us be more tactful in having a productive conflict that strengthens the relationship than a conflict where things fall apart.

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Lets get back to the conversation with David.

DJ: And in a way, what's beautiful that you shared here David, and I know you also talk about that in the book is somebody ideally both at least one of them needs to take onus to drive the process of repair and restoration and rejuvenation of the relationship, right? At some level, there's also an element of taking ownership for that process, whatever the outcome might be. So, can you talk a little bit about that?

DB: Well, hopefully both should start to take some ownership. It may take one person to initiate it but interpersonal problems almost always have an interpersonal component. Each of us bring something to the issue and I have got to be willing to own my part, but I need you to own your part.

And part of the conversation, the messiness might be my saying, I am not hearing you take any responsibility for this. It sounded as if you think it is all my fault and that's hard for me, because I don't think it is all my fault. I will own my part but I need to have you own yours. So, I think both have to take, one may take the initiative to start but both have to take at least some responsibility. Likewise, if it is a relationship both are committed to, all start to feel some responsibility to make sure that things are okay at the end. And it may be that they aren't quite okay at the end of this meeting and we need to come back to it. So, it is always useful after a difficult conversation the next day to come back and say, hey, where are you with that conversation? Are you okay? Then a person is likely to say, well, as a matter of fact and you still have a little bit more work to do.

DJ: And a related corollary to that I guess David, is you know this was a term used by one of my guests on the show who runs the Halftime Institute, a gentleman called Lloyd Reeb, and he uses the term, you need to have a side margin in your life, you know, if you fill the page and you don't have space, then you don't have opportunity to create the space for some of these conversations. Can you say a little bit about creating the space for us to be able to address some of these things that emerge as we go through life?

DB: There is the phrase called organization problem-solving. We didn't have time to do it right the first time, but we had time to clean up all the mistakes we were not doing it right. The scarce resource in organization, like the scarce resource in life, I think is time, it is not money, it is not people, that resource is time. That's a scarce resource. And the question is how do we spend our time? And I think we spend our time, a lot of our time in the secondary issues not the primary ones. Now, I don't know about you, but I make a to-do list.

DJ: And when you say secondary and primary sorry, David, just for me to understand, how do you distinguish the two?

DB: The primary are the really important issues, the major issues. And the secondary are the ones that will be nice to clean up but are crucial and there are relatively few really, really important issues, I think. Well, if I can stay focused on the really, really important issues then maybe I can find some time, some space for these important which I think is crucial, these relationships, as organizations are held together not by the organization chart but by relationships and if every member of an organization said who are the key people, I need in order to get my job done and I am going to pay attention to building those strong relationships, we would be much more efficient and much more effective.

DJ: So, David moving to a different theme, as a practicing coach, one of the questions I often think about is what's in the realm of change and what's hardwired in people, right? When we are trying to figure out what are the development areas that we need to focus on, that's a question that often comes up and what's worth really investing time and making the effort. How do you think about that? You talk about that in the book as well. How should we all think about what's hardwired and what's in the realm of change?

DB: The distinction people often make is between personality and behavior. And sometimes people say, well, that's just my personality and I say, I am not concerned about your personality. I think it is a long discussion actually what is personality; there's a lot of dispute about that. I would say that that's pretty hardwired. I think if I am introverted versus extroverted, I can become more social, but where I get my energy is pretty hardwired. But what we are concerned about in organizations, what we are concerned about as leaders, what we are concerned about relationships is behavior. It's behavior that's a problem. So, I could be an extrovert and I can have good social skills or I could be an extrovert and I could want to dominate the interactional conversations, not my extroversion. It is

the behavioral form it takes. And I think we have a lot of control over our behavior if we want it. So, when I deal with people the thing which I watch for is how willing are they to look, how willing are they to look at their behavior and maybe do something about it. If they in essence are not at all willing, I say to myself, is this going to be worth the effort and it may not be. So, the problem I see in the coaching I have done with executives is the problem is not in personality, it has been an unwillingness to learn.

DJ: And is that hardwired do you think that to use Carol Dweck's language, the growth mindset versus fixed mindset and the willingness to learn and grow? To what extent do you think that's hardwired versus something that we can work on?

DB: No, because what she says is that you can learn to have a growth mindset; she is very clear that, that is something that you can learn. I think what it comes from is probably early socialization and it is probably easier for some than for others. But I think that one can have a growth mindset if you want it. Now, I remember once asking a therapist; no, that's not the story. I heard this from a therapist that one time a patient asked her when am I cured? And the therapist said, when you stop wanting to learn. And I don't think that's a cure, I think that's the end of therapy, that's when therapy ends. So, do you have a mindset of wanting to continue to learn and it varies with areas. Now, there are some areas where I may not want to learn so it is not a generalized statement but there might be other areas which I do want to learn. And I think not being willing to learn is the one dimension that holds most people back in organizations and in relationships.

DJ: Now, switching frames as a parent, David, I have a 12-year-old girl and an eight-year-old boy. As I am going through this conversation I am wondering, what is it that as a parent I can do to a), stoke that mindset and b), you know, you talk about running this interpersonal dynamics course at Stanford, what would the equivalent of that course look for a 10-year-old? What are the kinds of things that we as parents need to bear in mind to develop to help kids build these interpersonal skills as they grow?

DB: Well, there is books and it is a field called PET, Parent Effectiveness Training, which has very similar concepts. The one thing with kids you don't label them, you focus on behavior, you don't label them. So, let me give you an example. When I was, I guess, 10, 9 no 10 or 12 years old, I still remember the instances. There were several times my mother said, well, David the trouble is you are just lazy. Turned out to be a very destructive comment as I said that's who I am. And I said to myself, gee, if I don't work hard, I am going to end up on the streets. And I saw myself as a lazy person and I had to overcome it. Well, anybody who knows me knows I am constantly working. So, that was a label and when we label kids, they take it in as who they are. Now, if she would have said, you are having a hard time getting your homework done on time, that's a behavior. Then we could have done something. So, I think we have to be careful about labeling. The other thing is we have to legitimize their feelings. So, I have a story in which I am not proud about but I think is very revealing. When my son was about 4-years-old, 5-years-old, he went down a slide and hit the back of his head and the edge of the slide and he was crying. I rushed over and I said, oh Geoffrey you are not hurt and with tears running down his face he said, how do you know how I feel, only I know how I feel and he had me, he was right. What I should have said was, I am upset that you are hurt, but I was delegitimizing his feelings. And we delegitimize it all the time, we say, oh, you shouldn't be angry, you shouldn't, your older sister shouldn't be mad at your... your older daughter shouldn't be mad at her brother just because he is now getting more attention. Well, she is mad, she is envious, that's the way it is.

DJ: I was reading a book, yeah, apologies. I was reading a book called Toxic Positivity, where it talks about this notion of not being present to the emotion that's emerging, but really quickly brushing it off with a positive emotion.

DB: Yes, yes.

DJ: You ought to be feeling this kind of thing.

DB: Yes, what you are feeling is what you are feeling, I may not like that I am feeling that way but I am feeling it. So, I think as a parent can we focus on behavior, legitimize their feelings and can we also be open to our own feedback? Can we say am I doing something that's causing a problem.

DJ: Moving to an adjacent theme David, a few days back I was in conversation with Jeffrey Pfeffer at Stanford who talks about power. One of the segments we spoke about was warmth and competence, how leaders need to strike a balance in the way they signal warmth and competence in different settings. And some of the stuff he says is, you need to come across as competent first for you to really have the influence and then for you to be able to get things done and I got a sense he talks about the notion of vulnerability being often counterproductive if you are solving for power. Do you see a difference of opinion in the way you look at the subject versus him or is it, is it just that you are saying the same thing but from different lenses?

DB: I think we are somewhat different but we... I would nuance it different. There are two types of vulnerability. One vulnerability raises questions about my core competence. So, when I taught the leadership class at Stanford, I said, if in the first day of class, I said, I actually don't know anything about leadership, but I was assigned this course, I would be crushed as I rushed out of the room as they should. That's vulnerability which raises questions about my competence. There's also vulnerability about me as a human. I remember the time in which I was teaching that class and my son was quite ill and I went to class and I said I am really going to try and be present but I have to tell you my son is ill and I am feeling distracted but I am really going to try to be here. That raised all sorts of support, caring and so on, I was showing my human side, by the way my saying that allowed me to be even more present but that's a side effect. So, I think what we are talking about is when we talk about vulnerability what are we vulnerable about? The other thing is there is a difference between competence in having the answer and competence in finding the answer. And I think leaders who pretend they have the answer to everything lose credibility because it is too transparent. But I think the leader who says, we are going to be able to solve this even though I don't have the answer now but I have every confidence that we could solve this is both more honest and more trust building. So, when I go in as a consultant, I am frequently asked by the client executive have you faced this problem before. I am not going to say well, I don't know anything about it. What I am likely to say is I have solved things that are similar and I am sure we can figure this out because what the client wants to know is that it is going to be solved. And my trying to say oh, I have the answer right away is false and they will see through it. And I don't think Jeff makes those distinctions.

DJ: Got it. David, this podcast is titled Play to Potential. As we wrap up, it is a question that I ask all the people that come on this show, what does the term mean to you, what does it take to play to potential the way you see it.

DB: To play?

DJ: To potential.

DB: Play to potential? Well, first of all, I think it is two things. One is, am I willing to grow? Now, to grow means that I am going to make mistakes but I have had more than one executive say to me, I have never made mistakes, I have only had learning opportunities. So, I think if you play to potential, you are going to take risks and you are going to fail sometimes. But the question is are you going to learn from it? The second thing is, is that to say, am I going to play to potential, I am going to need some help. Think of professional sports players; they have coaches. I think that if I can say I am going to reach my potential if I am willing to learn from other people, if I am open to feedback and so often in organizations when things go wrong, we bury it, we put it aside, we don't learn from it including making a mistake. To what extent an executive saying, I really blew that decision, I really want to learn from that. What do you think I did wrong. Now, that takes courage, but I think that you only can reach your potential if you are willing to try and you are willing to hear from other people and very few leaders are willing to do that.

DJ: Lovely. On that note David, real pleasure having you on the podcast. Thank you so much for making the time.

DB: Well, I have enjoyed it. Those were great questions and enjoyed our interaction.

DJ: Absolutely.

DB: It's fun to be with you.

DJ: Likewise, David, and it is always inspiring to see somebody who has really, you know, if I may digress for 30 seconds, I was watching this documentary Jiro Dreams of Sushi. I don't know if you have ever seen it?

DB: No.

DJ: It is about a Japanese Chef who is operating a tiny little restaurant in one of the basements of a Japanese Metro station and he has been doing it for 50 years or 60 years and when apparently Barack Obama visited Tokyo, he went and had a meal in that restaurant and that's how where the point being, he has taken something like sushi making to an art form by just really focusing on it over decades and the documentary talks about the various elements of the things that he focuses on. So, similarly, I guess interpersonal dynamics is a lot more critical to our lives than sushi. So, it is wonderful that someone like you has really, sort of really chiseled away at this over decades. Thank you.

DB: Thank you. Good luck then.

DJ: Thank you, David. I am just stopping recording.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Thank you for listening. I hope you found the conversation of value. Apart from what David says in the conversation, I really liked the way he showed up in the conversation. The way he was present and the empathy that was very evident in the way he listened and in the way he spoke. Something for me to reflect on as I interact with others.

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terms of being able to reach people that could get value from it and also attract higher calibre of speakers as we move forward.

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Thank you and bye now.

End of transcription

Nugget from Jennifer Petriglieri that is referenced: [Securing the base for the other to explore](#).

Nugget from Jennifer Goldman Wetzler that is referenced: [Understanding the 4 default conflict habits](#).

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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