



Guest

Michiel Kruyt is CEO of IMAGINE, an advisory boutique helping executive teams develop future fit leadership and company vision. He had a fifteen-year career at McKinsey and Co, where he was a partner focusing on top team effectiveness, large-scale transformations and culture change. He helped many top teams around the world increase their ability to lead with impact. Michiel has co-founded and led Aberkyn, a change-facilitation firm, now owned by McKinsey. Before joining McKinsey & Co, he had a 15-year career at Unilever.

Michiel, along with Aaron De Smet and Jacqueline Brassey of McKinsey has Co-Authored the book - *Deliberate Calm*, a tangible guide that combines cutting-edge neuroscience, psychology, and consciousness practices, along with the authors' decades of experience working with leaders around the globe.

In the podcast conversation, we speak about what it takes to be an adaptive leader given the changing world we live in. More specifically, we speak about being the Learning Zone versus Protective zone, climbing up the ladder of self-awareness, avoiding a triggering "nuclear" reaction and more. A very valuable guide to be effective in the times we are in.

Context to the nugget conversation

Welcome to the 99th 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/Investors/Advisors and other business leaders. 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 Michiel Kruyt, Co-Author of *Deliberate Calm – How to Learn and Lead in a Volatile World*, a book that is very relevant for the times we live in. Of the various things we discussed, I really liked his insights around the Ladder of self-awareness and how we can slowly move up the ladder. While we speak about the metaphor of an iceberg in an individual context, he speaks about how teams also have a collective ice-berg and it is important to recognize that. Without further ado, let's tune into the conversation with Michiel Kruyt.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Michiel, thanks so much for making the time for the Play To Potential podcast, really excited to be talking to you.

Michiel Kruyt (MK): Nice to be here Deepak, very nice.

DJ: And in this podcast, we are curious about people's journeys. So before we dive into talking about your recent book, *Deliberate Calm*, tell us a little bit about your journey and more specifically, some of the key transition points. I was particularly intrigued by a couple of points in your journey, HUL to McKinsey and then McKinsey to what you do now, but maybe there are more. So I would love for you to talk a little bit about your journey, especially some of the pivots along the way.

MK: Yeah, sure. I studied in Economics and then, I joined Unilever, and really enjoyed it. When I joined, I thought, well, let us do it for two years and then I will see where it ends up, but it was so much fun that I actually had a really nice 14-15 years with them with a couple of highlights running the global Magnum Ice Cream brand out of the innovation centre in Rome which was very exciting, and then, moving to Palm Beach, Florida where we bought Slim-Fast, the weight loss company. And that was a transition point for me and I had a couple in my career. This was one and it was basically, the Slim-Fast period was quite intense. It was a company that we kept outside Unilever and it grew double-digit, but it was the weight loss business, so it could also go double digit the other way around and at some point, after two years, that happened. And long story short, at some point, I got a thyroid infection, stress related. We were in a downward market situation, we got stuck in our management team, we had lots of tough discussions, we could not make tough decisions, at least it took too long according to my standard. And I got a choice from a doctor either to take out my thyroid or to look at the psychosomatic background. So I did the latter and that was super impactful, and it might actually have been the early early early seed of this book because at that point, I got very much in touch with the awareness work and deep transformational work, so becoming aware of patterns and learning how to transform unproductive patterns into productive patterns for myself. Now what happened to me when I started doing that work were two things, one is, every time I learnt something new about myself, I got more influence back in the office because I could stop blaming my colleagues and start changing myself which is a lot easier than waiting for others to change.

DJ: And you were working with somebody in this period Michiel?

MK: Yeah, I was actually part of a group, it was a group work, so lots of people. Basically, the work was around helping people discover their blind spots, what was in between you and your potential. So I have done that for a year or so, and in that year, my physical condition totally went away without medicine. And as I said, every time I got in the insight, I got more influenced back in the office, but I also felt my thyroid slow down. And at the top of this condition, I was burning 8,000 calories a day which is like you are continuously running a marathon that is quite intense. There was not so much a transition, but it was something that brought broader practice into my life that excited me so much and had such a personal impact on me that it started to ignite a passion for something that I had not known before. And what then happened is my interests shifted a little bit more towards this type of work and a little bit away from the marketing, sales, general management track I was on at Unilever. So after a while, I took a sabbatical and actually started to look at how can I bring this work into the boardrooms because we are not very well trained to handle change in

boardrooms, specifically when it is really tough, when paradigms need to shift, when people need to change mindsets, when they need to change or collaborate. So I thought, hey, what if I could bring this type of blind spot discovery work into boardrooms, it would solve a lot of problems, it certainly would have solved our problem if we would have gotten that skill into our team. So I took a sabbatical and interviewed everyone that had anything to do with working on the boundary between business change and people change, and ended up talking to a McKinsey Senior Partner, Michael Rennie who just traveled to the U.S. to introduce...

DJ: In Sydney, right, was not he based in Sydney at some point?

MK: Yeah, he was in Sydney and he experimented with what McKinsey at the time called mindsets and behaviours. And basically, that was based on an insight and a lot of good strategies but they did not get executed. And they did not get executed because people could not get their hearts and their minds around it and there was not enough buy-in and so this mindset and behaviour was actually there to help shift, let us say, the soft stuff in order to get the hard stuff done.

DJ: Got it. And I used to do some work with a gentleman called Bill Schaninger in New Jersey.

MK: Yeah, Bill was also part of the Org practice, I know him well, yeah.

DJ: Correct and he used to talk about Michael Rennie in Sydney. Got it.

MK: Yeah, he was a special innovator. I never aspired to actually work for McKinsey but when I met him, I thought, hey, this is where I, and I had another, I will do this for two years and then I will see what happens. But then, I ended up staying 15 years because I really enjoyed life at McKinsey and doing this work.

DJ: Wow. This was regular management consulting sort of in the McKinsey strategy, business, ops, sales, marketing kind of stuff or was it...transformation?

MK: No, it was very different because I only wanted to focus on this transformational work. So I joined Michael in this nascent practice that was called mindsets and behaviours, and we basically did only work with executive teams around the world to help them in their most difficult challenges, shifting their mindsets and behaviours. And then later on, that turned into large scale cultural transformations work as well.

DJ: Got it. Lovely. Michiel, moving to the book *Deliberate Calm*, can you talk a little bit about how this book came about, specifically the topic of leadership and associated themes have been studied and there is sort of millions of titles, so I am curious about what was the need that you were trying to fulfil with this piece of Work.

MK: Yeah, well, it actually brings me to another reflection moment I had in my career. When I felt that my learning curve went a little bit down at McKinsey, I took a sabbatical in 2019. And I was having breakfast with Tami Simon at a retreat in California. She is the founder of Sounds True, and she said, well, I am doing this nice event, it is called, what was it called, again, it was something like, your inner MBA, so it was very intriguing. So I told her what I did and she said, oh, wow, it will be interesting to do something together, but then you first need to write a book, otherwise no one knows who you are. So I thought, okay, how do I do that and then, we spoke a little bit about it, and she actually triggered, I should actually send her a book now that we are talking about it, but she triggered me to start writing. This was in 2019, I had time, I was on the sabbatical, so I started writing the outline and everything. And then, the reason why I did it is, one, I mean, she triggered it,

but as we have done this work in the past 10-15 years, lots of clients always asked, why do not you write a book about this because it is so intriguing and it is so useful and we cannot find anything that is related to our life. It is so applied to the work in the business world, we just cannot find it. So very often, you find books that are about the topic but they are written by either academic, but not by practitioners. So they were looking for that. And then, probably the most important reason why I wrote it and my co-authors should talk for themselves of course is that, I wished I would have known all of this personal mastery stuff when I started working. I hope my kids will actually read the book. They are now actually entering the work force more or less. I hope they will read the book and learn a bit for it and apply it, so they do not have to go through lot of the lessons that I had to go through.

DJ: That is a wonderful framing actually, I sometimes think about that in the context of the podcast to say, you know, if my kids could find it a value, then that itself is ROI (Return on Investment) for the effort.

MK: Exactly and that whole generation, yeah.

DJ: And just maybe going back to couple of things you said Michiel before we dive into the book, you spoke about taking a sabbatical each time, whether it was HUL to McKinsey or McKinsey to the current version of you, I find that interesting because very often when I work with leaders in transition, there is a temptation to back to back their journeys. You know, I use a metaphor of a trapeze artist, you know, you are sort of swinging trapeze and then you want to pull down to the next trapeze before you leave the previous one. So can you talk a little bit about, just maybe your experience of having done the sabbatical and therefore, for people in transition, what would your advice be, just in terms of going through a reflection process before figuring out what next?

MK: Yeah, so I think it is not only in transition. So my McKinsey sabbatical was basically, I wanted to renew, and of course you can see a transition as a renewal, but in the end, it is very important to withdraw yourself from your active life now and then because that is when creativity starts to waken up when you really start to deeply rest where you get new stimulus, where you can do things that you typically do not do when you are back to back in Zoom calls and meetings and other things. So the practice of retreat whether it is a sabbatical or whether it is a three-day silent retreat or whether it is a weekend walk in the mountains that you plan on your own, is a very very healthy leadership practice, and I have done it all my life. So these sabbaticals are longer ones, I have done two of them, they were like six months, but I do shorter retreats every year.

DJ: Got it. And just to maybe get tactical, how long are they and can you expand on how you think about your retreats?

MK: Well, anywhere between three days silent retreat or a 10-day silent retreat or the last years, I have done a couple of more like active retreats where I was more like walking or, you know, but very often in nature. And there is a practice to it, so I go in there with an intention, it is not like just doing nothing, I go in there with an intention to relax and discover and let new things emerge.

DJ: Got it. Thanks for sharing, Michiel. Moving into the book *Deliberate Calm*, you say that *Deliberate Calm* is not a leadership style of behaviour but a personal self-mastery practice. Can you say more about what it is, what you mean by the term *Deliberate Calm* and why it is possibly all the more relevant today?

MK: Yeah, so, I mean, the words have been chosen specifically, and I must say, once we started to co-write it with the three of us, with Jacqui and Aaron, we had long discussions also with the publisher about the title. The first title was *Leading and Learning Outside Your Comfort Zone*, and for

a lot of reasons, we dumped that, but the Deliberate Calm is actually a more described state that you are in, and Deliberate is around choice and it is around choice in high stake volatile situations, being a choice in any situation even the high stake volatile ones. And Calm is around emotionally calm, so being able to develop the capacity to hold uncomfortable emotions without being swept away by them. And as a leader in a world where there is way more change than ever, and it is increasing every time, I mean we all experience that the speed of change is also going faster, and it is getting more complex, so it is multi-stakeholder. So I have often talked to CEOs that are just retired or retired five years ago, I am so glad I am not a CEO today anymore because the world is so much more complex, the demands of the outside world on the business is so much bigger, you have to have an opinion on everything.

DJ: Just if I may come in with a search consultant question, if I wore my Egon Zehnder hat for 30 seconds, just building on that point Michiel, from a leadership competency perspective, what are the two-three things that have become leadership asks of today that did not exist maybe 5-10 years back in your mind?

MK: Well, I am grossly simplifying this, but 10 years back, there was a generation of leaders that were super smart and knew where to take the company. And now, we are looking for leaders who can connect with all the different stakeholders, who can hold a long-term view as well as delivering on the short term, and who are adaptable and what we call have learning agility. So I do not think we are now looking for CEOs that can do what they have done before. Because they have done it before, they think they know what to do but we are actually looking for CEOs that have learning agility and that they understand the adaptive situation there, very likely in, and that they can handle that.

DJ: Hmm. And in the book, you talk about the learning zone versus the protection zone. Can you share a little bit around what you mean by these because in a way, that appears again and again in the various case studies that you outline in the book, so can you talk to us about what these zones are, how do we know we are in these zones on the implication on leadership?

MK: Yeah, sure. Learning potential is actually, it sounds like a very simple concept but it is very profound. As human beings when we are entering into a situation, let us say we enter into a new room or we enter into a meeting, we sense whether it is safe or whether it is not safe. And when we feel it is safe, we can be in a learning state. Where we feel there is a threat, we get in a protection zone. And when you are in a protection zone, it could even be like me entering into this podcast, that in the beginning, I am kind of like a little, maybe a little anxious, not knowing what questions you are going to ask and then kind of, I could very easily get a little bit into a protection zone. And then what I would start to do is, I would feel a little anxious, I would try to have the right answers ready, so I am prepared for everything that you ask, and I will very much hold onto that. So with that, I would lose spontaneity, I would not be playing with you around the questions and the answers, and it would become a very stale and overly prepared interview. Now interestingly enough, whenever we work with executive teams, we start with explaining this concept of learning and protection. And then, we ask them if you look at your average board meeting, executive team meeting, how much time are you in protection and how much time are you in learning, what do you think the percentage is?

DJ: I would say 30% learning, 70% protection, maybe.

MK: Yeah, that is about right. And then when the topics get higher stake and the context gets more uncertain, what happens to the level of protection, does it go up or down?

DJ: Yeah, I would imagine the guards go up, it becomes...

MK: It goes up, right.

DJ: 10-90, yeah, whatever.

MK: So the inconvenient truth of this is that, when we most need our collective wisdom, we most need our open minds, we most need to ask questions and look for new answers, that capacity is least available to us. And it is not because we are stupid or because we are bad, it is because we are biologically wired to be that way. So therefore, learning and protection is a simple frame to make us aware that we are either in protection in learning and you can teach yourself to become aware of it. If you feel it in your body, you hear it in the tone of voice, you feel it in the breathing and you see it in each other, so that is why we use this a lot and there are many many teams that actually have made it a practice to call each other out on learning or protection state.

DJ: Hmm. And is this linked to the concept of psychological safety that Amy Edmondson talks about? As a leader, one of your jobs is to create the safety so that people spend more time in the learning zone versus protection zone, would that be a fair understanding?

MK: Well, I think psychological safety is definitely meant to create more of a learning zone. And what we are trying to create with this concept is that it is okay to be in a protection zone, it is just not very helpful when you are trying to lead something. But it is a natural response to a certain situation that can create a protective response. The trick that we want to get teams to do is that they actually address it, that they check, hey, are we in protection now, are we in the right state to get this solved or do we need to shift to learning.

DJ: Hmm. And maybe staying with that Michiel, what are some of the things to look out for a team to recognize that it is in protection zone versus learning zone, are there obvious tell-tale signs that people could be on the lookout for?

MK: Yeah. people know it immediately when you point it out, and the funny thing is, the team can be in protection but never all the members of a team are in protection. Typically, there is something going on between two team members or one team member is always hobby-horse and no one wants to challenge him. So there are always people that are like neutral observers and they do not act, they do not take responsibility for the learning of the team, but if they start to do it, they can actually lift the team up and get them into a learning state. So things to look for are, are we listening enough to each other, do we let other people finish their sentences, do we ask more questions than we tell things. And people recognize all these patterns. I mean, we had one team that spoke about, oh yeah, we know that, we load and reload. So when someone is talking, we are already reloading and then, we shoot again with our own opinion.

DJ: Got it. And you referred to one of the things I loved in the book, you talk about active observers if I am not mistaken, not passive observers, but observers who are not just observing but can be a little more proactive in showing the mirror to how the group is doing and therefore, move the group towards a learning state. Can you talk a little bit about that, about the responsibility of being an observer to a conversation?

MK: Yeah, it is really about that. If you look at team, so if you have a team of eight people, all of you are never at the same time involved in a conversation. So the chief marketing officer might be talking to the sales guy or girl and they are having an intense conversation and they might get in protection, and then, they would not notice it because they actually are so passionately defending

their points, so they do not notice that they are not open anymore. Now, the others can actually just raise their hand and say, hey, guys, are we in learning or in protection. It is very important to do that as a statement because then you drive people deeper in protection.

DJ: Hmm. Got it. Back to the book Michiel, one of the things you talk about quite a bit is this concept of dual awareness and you use the term Skylight in this context, can you talk a little bit about, I mean awareness I understand but there is something specific you have in mind when you say dual awareness, so could you expand on this one?

MK: Yeah, dual awareness is a new concept, I have not seen it before brought together. That is what we are trying to do in this book, especially because the world has changed so much and there is so many high change situations that people find themselves in. So we want to make them aware of two sides, the external world and the inner world. So the external world, we basically ask people to make a judgment. The situation that you are getting into, is that a familiar zone situation where you know the answer, you know what to do, it might be high stake, it might be low stake but it is clear what to do or is it an adaptive zone challenge where you actually do not, there is so much change going on that you do not exactly know what to do and you need to enjoy the learning. That is the learning agility. If in situations like that you are actually eager to learn and you can focus everyone on learning and improving and finding the answers and moving, being adaptive, so that is the external awareness, and then, we have the inner awareness around how do you respond to that. Now these two things need to be in balance with each other because if you have a high stake adaptive zone challenge and you are not aware of your inner response, we just hear it from the learning of protection discussion that you will be naturally wired to go into protection, and then, you will contract and you would not be able to bring your potential to the situation. So that is where the inner awareness becomes very important around, hey, what are my thoughts, feelings and body state when I am entering a situation like this.

DJ: Hmm. And what do you mean by the term Skylight that you use in this context?

MK: Yeah, so the skylight, that is in the old wisdom schools, people talk about the observer or to witness consciousness, you are witnessing yourself whilst you are in action, and the skylight is actually a simple metaphor practice where you imagine yourself looking down on yourself from the skylight, and you see yourself act, you listen to yourself talk whilst you are in action. And that is a very important practice to master that witness consciousness.

DJ: And can you talk a little bit about how one gets there, what are some of the approaches for people to build this muscle? Clearly, it is not a switch that gets activated overnight, but if you could expand on some of the ways people could build this dual awareness and the skylight to observe...

MK: Yeah, so there are a number of things. So you can build in your work practice, and so let me start with work and then I go to personal, in your work practice, you can build in rituals to actually check with each other, are we getting into an adaptive zone challenge. If we are, let us be really aware of how we respond to it because we know we are at risk of getting into protection. So let us be very aware and let us be very open to help each other get in learning, stay in learning and notify when we get triggered in protection. So that is a practice that you can actually do before you get into meetings, or if you do it individually, if you look at your agenda, you can look at, hey, what are the external situations that will trigger intense emotions in me. This is a little bit almost like a pre-situation practice.

DJ: Before you enter the battlefield kind of a practice.

MK: Exactly. It is a locker room practice before you go into the field. Now when you are in the field, that is actually when you need the skylight, and the way to practice that. I mean, we all have heard about mindfulness and so, meditation is a good mindfulness practice where you can practice this skylight in the silence and the peace and quiet of not doing anything but just sitting on your cushion, and that transfers to real life. So getting that same reflective mode while you are being an action, that is the practice. And the third step is doing it afterwards. So you have it before, during and after. Now clearly, the during is the most difficult part, and people in business are actually not really trained in it. If you are an athlete, you are continuously in the competition and you get immediate feedback if something goes wrong and you have immediate responses or they have rituals that are much more designed to actually develop this skylight capability, in the business world, it is a bit more difficult.

DJ: Hmm. Interesting. Would you be able to share an example or two in terms of how athletes build that skylight in their training?

MK: Yeah. Well, you see it. So for example, I am a competitive golf player, so I can use a golf example, but when you are playing golf, you actually train yourself to have a ritual where you visualize your shot. And then, before you start getting into the action, you step into your performance box where you do not think anymore, you just trust your body and you're training and you let the wisdom do the work. And when you make a mistake, you actually do not linger onto it. You know that you want to linger onto it but you actually let go and you move forward. And when you look at tennis players, they will have their rituals with their service and all their little things they do. And Nadal is a great example, he is probably the most impressive one who does this.

DJ: Elaborate rituals. Actually, it came up in my recent conversation with a gentleman called Ethan Kross of Michigan who has written a book called Chatter and he says that some of these rituals help us bring order. When things are not in control, you do a few things to tell yourself that okay, there are a few things I can control and have it sorted, and in a way, he goes on to say that that at least quietens down the chatter in our minds.

MK: Yeah, I think there is a difference between a tennis player and a businessman. The tennis players often know what the unproductive chatter is. When you are in business, a lot of CEOs have a little bit of an impatient demeanour, I am generalizing again but just as an example, many CEOs I have worked with were impatient and want to get things done quickly. They actually might believe that that is a helpful mindset. What they do not see is what the impact is on the team and that people are not committed to the decisions because they have not really deepened them out enough, and then you cut corners. So it is quite important that you understand and you do work on yourself to understand what are the patterns that are useful and productive and what are the ones that are unproductive.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. Sometimes, accessing the skylight doesn't need elaborate practices. If we work hard enough to build the muscle of pausing and observing ourselves, we can slowly access that vantage point that Michiel calls as Skylight.

Rich Fernandez (RF) of Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute suggests that we can bake in mindfulness in the small things we do to get there.

RF: *"When people think about meditation, they think about having to do exactly what I have just said which is set side you know x block of time and you know sit in a certain way and close your eyes and protect the space for formal practice. But there is also a way to practice mindfulness and meditation in an integrated way. For example, as you move through the course of your day, integrate it into your day between meetings if you need to walk to the rest room make that a walking meditation. I am actually serious about that. Become aware of your bodies as it moves for space between your office and the rest room. Become aware of your foot fall, become aware of the felt sense of your body. How are you feeling actually in that moment? Or take the opportunity to focus on breath or this being in India this Podcast you know if you have a "Mantra" that you are familiar with or particularly like us that. And I say "Mantra" and there is often a religious component to that but here what I am referring to is really finding an object of your attention to train your attention upon it whether be "Mantra" or breath or walking or sensation you can really do this throughout the course of your day. I was driving to work today and I was focusing on my breath not so much that I wasn't able to drive but there but when there is a red light when I was stopped in traffic in and out for three breaths, I noticed my breath. Next stop like same thing integrated practice is also helpful one."*

DJ: Let's get back to the conversation with Michiel Kruyt.

DJ: One of the things that comes up in my coaching work Michiel if I may build on is efficiency versus effectiveness. Sometimes, I come across leaders who are very clinical and want to get on with it but very often by doing that, you are right, it comes in the way of motivation, it comes in the way of maybe exploring new possibilities or deepening a solution or figuring out potential roadblocks and stuff that could take five more minutes but could help you get to a better place, so with you on that. Building on self-awareness Michiel, in the book, you also talk about five levels of self-awareness. I found that interesting. Again, the way you have laid out the ladder of self-awareness across these five levels. So would you be able to touch upon them and just give a broad frame of how you think of these levels?

MK: Yes, I can. I think the levels are interesting as in there is a development. You asked earlier around how do you develop the skylight, and it is actually a long process, and even if you have it, sometimes you can drop away when the tension really gets high. The phases are, it starts with unawareness, so you are not aware of your inner world, you are not aware of whether you are in adaptive or in a familiar zone. You could call that bliss but it is basically unaware. You are unaware and you might be ineffective. Then, you have this delayed awareness, and we all have had that. So you are in a meeting and then you say something and then two seconds later, you think oh my God, I wish I would not have done that because it came from a very reactive behaviour. So you start to become aware of triggers that do not get the best out of you. You get in fight flight freeze behaviour, but you see it only after the fact, that is step one. Then, you get too perceptive, you are aware in the moment, so you notice it in yourself in the moment, but you are not actually able to do something about it. So it is kind of like, there we go again. And then, the next level is resilient. This is quite masterful in which you are actually noticing in yourself that you are getting a trigger and you can redirect yourself in the moment. So I sometimes have it when I am working with a team and I am getting triggered into something and then all of a sudden, I see myself as oh, I am actually very reactive, I am reacting to someone in the group, I do not agree with him, I am getting into a fight, and I am not listening. And then, I can push the pause button and say, oh, wow, I actually got into a protection mode now, did you guys see that.

DJ: Hmm. And you call yourself out.

MK: I call myself out. And then, it is actually very interesting because then, you can see how you can redirect yourself. And even though it might feel vulnerable, people actually find it quite strong that you can actually get yourself. By the way, they have all seen it, so it is better that I call...

DJ: Pre-emptive strike.

MK: Yeah, and this is still all in the moment. And then, that is the fifth phase which is adaptive. There, you start to identify a number of patterns that keep popping up for you. So for example, I have had a pattern for a very long time that if I did not feel trusted, it triggered my emotions. So I felt insecure and then, I started to make my points very strong and stop listening. And once I started to see that it happened over and over again, I needed to go deeper and start working on that pattern, why do I need to feel trusted before I can actually relax into something, and why do I ask others to trust me first before I trust them. So once I started to work on that pattern, at some point when I had rewired that, those triggers did not show up anymore.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host, Deepak Jayaraman. In my work with leaders, I find that very often, they start climbing the ladder of self-awareness from the bottom. You show them the mirror and shine the light on an issue that is in their blind spot. They move from Level 1 to Level 2 and start noticing it at least in hindsight. Then they do some more work and start noticing it in the moment and move to Level 3 where they are noticing but still not able to regulate. At that time, when they want to move from Level 3 to Level 4, they start telling themselves a story that they are like this only and start wearing that on their sleeve. Like Marshall Goldsmith says in his book, what got you here, won't get you there, they often are reluctant to do the work to move from Level 3 to Level 4 and that can come in the way of them unlocking their Potential.

In this podcast, many moons back, we spoke to Tasha Eurich (TE), a lady who has researched the topic of Self-Awareness for many years. When I asked her about her research methodology, she used an interesting phrase called Self-Awareness Unicorn to describe some of the people she studied.

TE: *"So, we didn't set out to identify this people and I'll define what unicorn is in a second. But I originally thought was all we have to do you know we developed this we developed and validated this very lengthy comprehensive assessment of self-awareness. I thought all we have to do is go find a bunch of people who score high as rated by themselves and someone who knows them well and then I'll crack the code of self-awareness but what I discovered when we started to do that and we started to interview highly self-aware people is a lot of them and I wouldn't venture a guess but I'd say probably most at least in our experience had sort of always been like that you know think about those people that are just naturally self-aware just the way they are wired and when we tried to figure out what they do to stay self-aware they would literally say things like you know what never really thought about that before I don't know if I do anything consciously and we are so frustrated and we were thinking ohh my gosh who are we going to figure this out and then it dawned on us that all we had to do was go replicate what I had seen with my coach and clients right find people who didn't start out a self-aware but who were able you know over the course of months and years of commitment and effort to learn to see them self clearly and so that's what we ended up doing we searched the world basically we used no ball sampling which is you ask everyone you know to fill up the survey and then they ask everyone they know and it actually we got all around the world and very very globally diverse sample but what we found eventually were 50 people who not only were highly self-aware as rated by them and someone who knew them well but they and the person who*

knew them well also basically established that they had improved their self-awareness so they were checks and balances built into the system just because you know you start to think about if I one up to hundred and I said hey are you self-aware would you like to be a part of our study. I'm sure we will talk about this later in this podcast but most people are not very good judges of their self-awareness so that was why you know had developed this checks and balances and that was very complicated but once we found this 50 people a couple of observation there were no demographic patterns by gender, age, nationality, job type, industry. We had students, we had Fortune 50 executives, we had said at home parents, we had professionals really just to broad swathe of people and what was so interesting to me about that is showed us that almost anyone can improve their self-awareness if they learn some of the tips and chunks that the unicorns aren't covered for us. So it was just a really fun process and by the way the reason we call them unicorn is my research assistance were joking that like ohh you want us to find self-aware people who didn't start out that way or we might all be looking for a unicorn so everybody thought that was so funny and then you know when we find them, we thought you know this is kind of the perfect term for this people. It's hard to imagine that they exist but when we found them there was just so much, we learnt."

DJ: You don't need to be an entrepreneur of a Billion Dollar Start up. Whichever field you are in, are you willing to do the work to be a Self-Awareness Unicorn?

You might appreciate that when we started the Play to Potential Podcast, the concept of Podcast was relatively new. Now, there are thousands of podcasts all around. It has become super critical for us to show Customer Engagement Metrics when we reach out to new guests for them to see if it is a good ROI on their time. If you are deriving value, I would really appreciate you taking a moment and sharing your review on Spotify, Apple or any other platform you use to consume this content.

Let's now get back to Michiel Kruyt.

DJ: The other piece I picked up which I found very interesting in the book Michiel was, you talk about the distinction between ambition and purpose, and I really liked one of the terms you use, you say, ambition is finite but purpose is not, it is infinite. So if we can tap into your purpose, I like that framing, people talk about it but when somebody frames it that way, it captures the essence quite beautifully, so can you expand on that?

MK: Yeah, no definitely, I mean this is a very personal experience, has been a very personal experience for me as well where I must say the first 40 years or so of my career, I was, you know, I thought I was super passionate about my work and I was, but I was also very ambitious, so a lot of it was around climbing the ladder. So every two-three year, you are talking to Head-hunters to see if there is something more exciting outside, and it is kind of like all about going up the ladder. And then when I got into my first transition moment in the U.S. when I had this thyroid infection, that is when I actually got connected with a deeper purpose, something that I really felt in a way where my passion met the need of the world which is a great way to, I mean if you can actually do something that you are super passionate about, which for me often has to do with creating a lot of personal growth for myself, and if that connects to something that is needed in the outside world, then, you have found a purpose that is also purposeful for others. And that is lasting. I mean, the moment I joined McKinsey due to this mindset and behaviour work, I never looked back, I never looked at any other opportunities, I was just living the dream, I was living my purpose.

DJ: Hmm. And you also say that growth, you use the metaphor of working out in the gym, and you say that, the muscle actually builds when we are resting during the phase of recovery, and you talk about physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual recovery, I loved the emphasis on recovery, can you talk a little bit about your observation on how leaders think about this or do not think about this, and why this phase of recovery is important when we look at leadership effectiveness?

MK: Yeah, I think recovery, and especially in times where adaptability and learning agility is so important, is critical, and it is a grossly overlooked dimension of leadership. So busyness is being celebrated and recovery is being overlooked. It is like the physical metaphor is always easy, I mean, your muscles grow after you have done the workout. Your cognitive loading has a limit to it. You can do four hours of real, deep, concentrated high quality cognitive work in the day and the rest you can do a little bit more easy stuff or administrative stuff, but you cannot do 8 or 10 hours of high quality work. So what starts to happen is that your presence starts to come down, very high likely your cortisol and adrenaline levels go up, and you get into this busy mode. So it is important to notice in yourself that you are building those recovery periods because that is when, one, your system can recharge, but it is also where new ideas come up where you can actually work through things that have happened and you can really actually process it, so it does not leave any residue. And you just become a better long-term practitioner leader.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host, Deepak Jayaraman. I guess the reality is that there is an inverse correlation between the quantum of work you have to do and the time it takes. Unless we really focus on decluttering what is on our plate, it is hard to build recovery time in our life, whether it is exercise or it is leading a company.

Matt Dixon (MD), a Triathlon coach who trains the Who's who in the Valley including Sir Michael Moritz, speaks about the criticality of recovery and the risk of dumping a training programme on top of life.

MD: *"so the biggest mistake that we see people make is to think I know I need to exercise because I know that's something to do that's makes me healthy so, how am I going to add this on the top of life and many people what they do and the great example is Oh it's wonderful go to bunch of friends I am going to do Ironman Turkey and it sounds wonderful and what does it take to train for that and it takes 20 hours a week goodness me I don't have twenty hours a week but there's the training program and to dump it on top of life and I am just going to have to find a way to cram it in. To be successful and to actually integrate the key components of rejuvenation and recovery as well as training what we have to realise is that we have to integrate it into a person's life so that not only does, they can then improve in that discipline because hopefully they are looking for improvement but so that they can lift their health they can lift their performances as a CEO or an executive and it can help them to thrive across areas of life and so it's all about integration, we go through a very particular process where we look up the habits the start and we look up their genuine landscape of their life what have been non-negotiable? And when we think about non-negotiable there's obviously the commitments in the work place quite often there's the commitment with their family and we want them to be available and present for their family, their children, their wives, their husbands or whatever it might be and then the other component that we have is non-negotiable is sleep and saying ok how much do you sleep and is that necessary and is it high enough quality which is the other component of effective sleep not just quantity are you getting enough? And with those building blocks in life we have a certain amount of time left over and that ebbs and flows with the different demands of life but then we can go about same equation, with that time is left over how do we*

optimize it? how do we create an optimization mind-set with that time is left over and that's a very different way of going about it, so rather than just dumping a training program on top of life or throwing a bunch of habits and saying this after navigate it becomes an all-encompassing recipe for them and that's really where took element of resilience, and ultimately success comes from."

DJ: Back to Michiel, I also love what he says. Sometimes, the best ideas come from the phase of recovery when we are not doing much but our brain is subconsciously working on something. Leaving that space is helpful for us to be more effective and creative.

Thank you for listening. Let's now get back to the conversation with Michiel Kruyt

DJ: And moving to group dynamics Michiel, in the book, you talk about moving from exploring icebergs individually to exploring the collective iceberg as a team which I found really interesting, and in that context, you actually talk about a domino effect which I found intriguing. I was particularly curious about how something like a domino effect might play out in a family context. My wife and I, we have two kids, 13 and 9, so there are these passages of play where each one of us is triggering the other, and I love the notion of the domino effect, so if you could talk a little bit about this notion of the collective iceberg as a unit, but also this concept of the domino effect that sometimes we observe in groups.

MK: Yeah. So let us talk a little bit about icebergs. So we spoke about awareness of your thoughts, your self-talk and your emotions and your body state. In a way, that is kind of level one. You see what is going on in the here and now in your self-talk and in your emotions. What you do not know yet is where do they come from, what is driving those. Now what is driving those has a lot to do with your history, the culture you grow up in, the values you hold, beliefs you have, what success looks like, what is being expected of you, so that forms the next level of your iceberg and that creates patterns. We all walk into teams with our individual icebergs, and there is a collective team iceberg. So there is a collective, you have a collective family iceberg, I am sure, where you have some shared values, you have expected behaviours and you know what you want to create. The individual icebergs will bounce into each other, and you very often see that with, if you bring it to the family with children, in the birth order, they very often pick different icebergs, so by definition, they bounce into each other, because they are competing, the icebergs are competing. So in business teams, you see people, and we talked about the domino effect because the triggers react on each other, the triggers of people react on each other. So if I have a high need for respect, what I call respect, people listening to each other in the team, and I have a colleague that has a high need for speed and decision making, then his, what in my view would be, shortcutting a discussion will trigger my need for respect and listening to each other and then, we are going into this dance, and you see that all the time. And when people start to see it, so we often do this, this trigger exercise where people share their allergies in the team, what are we allergic for, and it is very funny because you can immediately. even not having worked with the team, I can point out the behavioural patterns that will be happening in this team.

DJ: Hmm. And I guess it is almost like a nuclear chain reaction with no cadmium rods. And maybe back to the point you made that is where either an active observer or a collective skylight where we are able to catch ourselves and maybe raise our hand and say, which mode are we in can sort of change the dynamic.

MK: Yeah, the interesting thing about our biology, it is very predictable and we also know how to manage it. So if you are in this intense stuckness, very busy getting nowhere, very intensely busy getting nowhere and someone raises his hands and say, hey, we often call it, let us take a balcony

moment. Then within 20 seconds, people look at each other and they restart the conversation and they are at the level of learning because your amygdala disengages, this whole limbic reaction system disengages when you take a breather.

DJ: And in that moment, is there a ritual or two as a team that you suggest, or is it just even giving 30 seconds is often enough to reset that conversation?

MK: Well, asking the question, let us take a balcony moment. And then what often is, good is to just do a quick round of, hey, how do we feel, and then you get back into the discussion.

DJ: Hmm. No what I love about that is it does not point fingers at an individual, it just points to the temperature in the room to say this is not helpful and goes around the room and resets the temperature if you will to have a more productive dialogue. Very often in these situations, it gets personal very quickly and gets one on one and gets bilateral.

MK: Yeah, that is a point. So you have to make it more normal than normal that this happens. And you also should not make it a deeply psychological therapy session every time that this happens because then you cannot get anything done. So there is a place for that as well if you go deeper into the patterns but when you are in business meetings, it is actually good to have a way to quickly move through this and get back into learning.

DJ: Hmm. It is a great point. Yeah, there is a risk of overdoing it and not getting work done and sort of going down a rabbit hole which often is not productive in a business context. Got it. And as you think about your work Michiel, are there specific nuances that come about when people work with teams in a virtual context? Some of these things end up taking slightly different shapes and forms when eight different people are in different locations. Any additional nuances you would like to throw on how to handle the collective iceberg when you are distributed?

MK: Yeah, sometimes it makes it easier because it is easier to kind of like, people do not talk so much through each other, there is less talking at the same time in Zoom meetings or Teams meetings, yet you need to spend more time on the fabric of the team in a way. So you need to do a little bit more check-ins and check-outs, like, are we actually feeling good with this conversation, did everyone feel heard and are we aligned on what we decided. Being a little bit more explicit about doing those checks at the end and before you discuss, talk a little bit about what people want to get out of it, makes it a deeper dialogue because you cannot read the body language that well.

DJ: Hmm. Got it. The other question I had was of the various things you discuss in the book, are there a few things that you feel people get cognitively but struggle to put it into practice? What has been your experience in terms of getting it here versus really driving behavioural change?

MK: Well, your recovery is definitely one. The busyness is very hard to give up for people. It is actually very hard for people to think that being in recovery is actually good for your work. Unless you actually give yourself an amount of time to experience it and see that it actually works, it is a hard concept to get. The other thing is you need to build in rituals for all of the things. But if you do not make rituals to make the hard things easy, it is very hard to call someone on protective behaviour if you have not created a ritual around it because then, it very easily starts to feel like, oh, this is personal. It is very hard to practice your skylight if you do not do it regularly. If you do not start to develop this awareness of your self-talk, of your emotions, I mean very often when we start working with people, they can mention two emotions, they feel good or bad, and that is kind of like, you know, if you really want to practice your awareness, you need to expand your vocabulary about your feelings a little bit, so you know where you are actually at. So mastery does take practice, and

actually making your mind and your presence practice important, as important as your crafts practice, like being a good marketing guy or sales guy or industry guy, whatever, is important.

DJ: Got it. Michiel, this podcast is titled Play To Potential. As we wrap up, I find it interesting to get different people's take on this theme and what the term means to them. What does the term Play

To Potential mean to you?

MK: Yeah, I would change a word if I am allowed to do. I would make it Play With Potential. In this time of massive change, the game is a lot around where is the potential that I can play with in myself, in others, and in the outside world. So the with versus the to, it feels like the two potentials, you almost have a visual what the potential looks like, and I think that playing with potential is a continuous active, looking for the great things and the opportunities and the possibilities and adapting, so I like it a lot actually, I mean I like to play it to potential because it triggered the with potential in me.

DJ: No, I love it. In a way, as you are speaking, I am just thinking aloud, it is a distinction between, sort of looking at the moon from a distance versus playing with a horse that you can ride. It is almost the way you are describing it as like potential is there, you can access it but it is just a question of what you want to do with it, and how you play with it.

MK: I think that is exactly the point. So the potential is there, it is always there, all that gets in the way is ourselves. It is our unawareness, it is our blind spots, it is us getting caught up in old ways of doing things that made us successful in the past, that gets in the way of full potential.

DJ: I love it. If I may relate, one of the guests when I asked this question, he said, I like the term Play To Potential because you cannot work to potential, you can only play to potential.

MK: That is also true. I mean the play probably triggered the with in me, it is nice, yeah.

DJ: True. I had not thought of that interpretation when I named it Play To Potential, it was intuitive but when he pointed out that distinction, it was interesting but now, the two and the with nuance is quite profound as well. Michiel, thank you so much for your time and for your insights on the podcast, really valuable.

MK: Thanks, I enjoyed it, Deepak.

DJ: Cheers, good night.

MK: Bye.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Thank you for listening.

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Thank you for listening and look forward to having you tune into one of the other conversations at the podcast. The podcast is about 20% of my time. My primary vocation is that of an Executive Coach and a Discreet Sounding Board to leaders. If you wish to know more about my advisory work, you could visit playtopotential.com and check out the About Deepak section.

Thank you and bye now.

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Rich Fernandez that is referenced: [Developing the meditation habit.](#)

Nugget from Tasha Eurich that is referenced: [Self-awareness Unicorns.](#)

Nugget from Matt Dixon that is referenced: [Rest, Sleep and recharge.](#)

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Michiel Kruyt - Nuggets

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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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