

Transcript - In Conversation with John Amaechi OBE - Being an ethical leader

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Host 00:03

Welcome to Future Talent Learnings In Conversation podcast series, where we talk to business leaders and thinkers to uncover their perspectives about the changing world of work. This episode is hosted by Future Talent Learnings, Karam Filfilan.

Karam 00:18

Today, I'm discussing the value of personal principles and how to have difficult conversations with psychologist John Amaechi. A former NBA basketball star, John is the CEO of Amaechi Performance Systems, a non-executive director of the Central Manchester University Hospitals NHS Trust and a global ambassador for Amnesty International.

Karam 00:38

In 2007, John became the first NBA player to speak publicly about being gay. In this wide ranging interview, John talks candidly about image and resilience growing up as a six foot plus black child in 70s Manchester, why his personal principles led him to turn down a \$17 million contract while in the NBA and why honesty and difficult conversations are at the heart of true leadership.

Karam 01:01

Enjoy the podcast. John, welcome to this Changeboard Future Talent podcast. I thought a good place to start maybe for our audience for people that may have heard you may not have done is to go back to the kind of beginning.

Karam 01:12

So you were born in Boston in America to an Nigerian father and an English mother who separated when you were quite young, moved back to Manchester or Stockport, I believe, when you were three, is that correct?

Karam 01:25

To be near your mother's family. What was life growing up for you like in Stockport? What do you remember about those times?

John 01:32

I mean, I have roundly warm feelings of of of growing up. My grandma was lovely. My grandad was a bit abrupt and a bit old fashioned. OK. In all the ways that I suppose are. Would be troubling now. You know, he didn't understand the mother who who wanted to have a or was willing to have a life without a father around.

John 01:57

You know, mum, who's willing to not have a partner, kind of old fashioned, was even a bit weirded out with the fact my mother was a doctor, I think. But roundly, really warm, my mother made sure that we were never left wanting, never felt deprived, never felt, you know, frightened.

John 02:18

We were well prepared for life. Through her. Yeah.

Karam 02:24

And what were your interests as a child?

John 02:27

Reading and cake.

Karam 02:28

Any particular cake?

John 02:29

No, it didn't it didn't matter reading and cake were the two things that I was most endorsed in I love to read, read Azimov when I was seven Along with things like the hardy boys, even though they're all the same I loved I loved to read my family was very big on that. Most of our, most of our trips out would involve a trip to the library. Where we were always allowed to

get as many books as we could carry and then encouraged to consume them, you know voraciously and then on the cake side I wasn't encouraged to consume them, but I did

Karam 03:03

And what was it about Asimov, particularly, that attracted you?

John 03:07

There's a great quote, and I've you know, I can never do it verbatim. But essentially, Asimov says that whilst many people think that science fiction is the is the stuff of nonsense, what they don't realise is that science fiction is an existential metaphor for the human condition.

John 03:25

And I always think that that's that's my reverse rationalisation for my love of science fiction. It's the idea that you could see these world where the future was highlighted with such, vivid detail that it's almost like a recalling of a memory. The idea that people could see a world that despite its strifes and struggles, which is which is always the center of science fiction, despite the worries about the impact of technology on the future, despite the ethical dilemmas that are always presented in science fiction.

John 03:59

Human beings... Overcome, and there's something quite lovely about that.

Karam 04:06

And I mean, you know, was it something about kind of escape the escapism side of it as well, or, you know, being able to get away from from everyday life, or is it just the kind of the psychological angle that you're talking about,

John 04:18

I mean, I think the just being able to dive into another world was amazing I mean I the idea that that you are you are gone from whatever the packaging of you is for a for a moment and all of a sudden you're a you know an alien martial artist who runs around the galaxy saving lives or you're a you're a robot an Android that is becoming sentient and has a responsibility to save the human race and in the case of some of the Asimov stuff. It doesn't matter but you leave your packaging behind and you know I didn't have overly problematic packaging but as one of the few black people in Stockport in the 70s and as a massive black kid in Stockport in the 70s I stuck out like a sore thumb and many of my interactions happened on that basis of what people saw not what people could gather of my brain. So it's quite nice when you can just enter this space where you know one of the characters is a lizard man so being a big black person from Stockport hardly makes you unusual

Karam 05:28

And you've talked about that before in, in kind of your book and some other interviews where, you know, you were seen as someone that should be, um, physically good at sport, you know, rugby player, you know, a basketball, even though you didn't obviously play basketball to you were kind of 17, you picked up basketball there. How, how did that kind of affect your psyche as you were growing up, you know, you wanted to be known for kind of your mind and you wanted to escape into that and, and sport wasn't your thing when you were growing up, was it?

John 05:52

Yeah. I mean, it's still not my thing. Sport was never my thing, really. Yeah, it's not that I wanted to be recognised for my mind. I mean, I might have that now, actually more than I had back then. But it's simply that I was confused by the fact that even after talking to me, people would still not be able to differentiate between what they think my body should be doing and what they know from my conversation my mind is capable of.

John 06:20

It's just seemed incredibly limiting to me the idea that the picture of me that that appeared in the retinas of other people overwhelmed any, any impression I could ever make through my verbal or other interactions.

John 06:34

It was just incredible to me.

Karam 06:36

And do you find that's changed towards you? It must have changed, but it's still a similar sort of-

John 06:40

It hasn't changed. I mean, if I'm not working, I don't leave my house because it's exhausting. It's exhausting to hear people ask me what the weather's like up there. It's exhausting to have people ask me or tell me very often as they do, you should play basketball, which is ironic and stupid on any number of levels, but is irritating.

John 07:01

It's exhausting to not be believed when I tell people I'm a psychologist or the director of a hospital. It's exhausting and also I have no recourse because the recourse that, you know, many right minded listeners would have was the idea that you can get indignant and and say, don't you know who I am or I've got PhDs, damn it, or any of these responses, but none of those help.

John 07:25

They only exacerbate the situation. It happened in the airport the other day. Somebody came up to me and said I was coming back to England and so it was an English person stood in the queue with me and he's like, yeah, so you must have been a rugby player.

John 07:40

And I was saying, when you tell people what they must have done, you really are telling me you really are telling them what you think they're good for and by extension that they aren't good for anything else.

John 07:51

And I was like, no, I'm a doctor. And the look on his face was one where he looked like I had insulted him and he then went into a diatribe about how I didn't mean anything by that. It's like, well, you kind of did.

Karam 08:07

You've taken it on first glance, there's no depth to that whatsoever.

John 08:10

You have walked up to a stranger and an initiated conversation. And now I'm apparently the the a-hole for for pointing out that you've made some rather grand assumptions.

Karam 08:21

And people wouldn't do it to other people, that's the thing.

John 08:23

Plus you never come well only the rudest of people would go up to an overweight person and say hey so sumo for you or you know you must have trouble managing your food intake or you just wouldn't comment people with dwarfism you don't go up to them and ask them how tall they are not unless you're the most crass and ridiculous of persons. You just never would, wouldn't go up to them and say hey circus? So you're in the circus? like no but some version of that nonsense is the purview of almost every conversation I have

Karam 08:57

So going back to when you were now a teenager perhaps, what was it you wanted to do? What was it you, where did you want to go? Do you want to be a psychologist? And the plan was to go and study in the UK to Leeds.

Karam 09:10

And how far did you get down that road?

John 09:12

Not particularly far, well I mean the the goal to be a psychologist never changed it never varied, the type of psychology I was interested in varied reasonably radically. But there was no there was no challenge to not going it was simply that I was going to move to another country to do it. I discovered basketball and I always emphasise this to people I didn't discover basketball from the perspective of oh I love this sport. I love running around. I like being good at it when I did get good at it but I didn't get good at it for about three years until I was passively good enough to say I'm good at this. So in the early days of me playing in the UK those were the days that I decided to go to America.

John 09:57

In those in those moments I was not good at basketball not good. I simply was in this environment where everywhere I

looked and I use this example a lot in workplaces everywhere I looked the people who looked at me reflected back my potential. And yet outside of that basketball environment everywhere I looked people reflected back that I was some kind of monster to be avoided to be scared of to laugh at whatever and so you suddenly find yourself as it as a kid in this environment where everywhere you look all you can see is your potential.

John 10:30

It's intoxicating, so in my head it's like if it's good with these random blokes who are still my friends to this day actually the entire crew. If it's good with these random people in a gym, a horrible community gym, in Chalton then what must be it be like if I'm in the country where it's played best. It literally was that equation as naive as that is I thought if this is this good maybe a gym that doesn't have water leaks and smell of urine in America where the Sun shines always and there's hot dogs would be better and that was it that was my lure into sport.

Karam 11:09

There's an almost a sense of modesty there. I mean, you know, it's one thing to think this is going to be where I want to be. This is what America is the place to be. This is the best place it could be.

Karam 11:17

But to be able to then carry that through, I believe, you know, you said you had you said that with your mother, you formulated something you called the plan.

John 11:26

Yeah, I mean, it's not, I don't think it's anything to be modest or immodest about. I mean, it's very practical. Everything I did was deeply practical. I mean, we remind people on a regular basis, the work that a lot of the work we do in leadership is reminding people of the mundanity of excellence in leadership.

John 11:43

It's really not about episodic high achievement, episodic moments when you rise to some Arthurian challenge. It's really more like a consistent battle with really mundane, ordinary challenges. And so how do you get to America?

John 12:08

There's a volume of letters that need to be written to strangers to compel them to respond.

Karam 12:14

How many letters did you write?

John 12:15

3,000. And it was pre-email, so there was no copy and paste, unfortunately.

John 12:20

So I wrote 3,000 letters to America saying, I'm six foot nine, black English guy, been playing for a year and a half, whatever it was at that point. I've been, I'm keen to play basketball at the highest levels.

John 12:34

Are you interested in helping me on that journey?

Karam 12:36

And how many came back?

John 12:37

Three. Only one of them said yes.

Karam 12:40

And that was the one?

John 12:41

That was the one I went to. But that's, I mean, there's nothing about that that's profound.

John 12:45

There's nothing about that that any child could not do. That's how boring it is to achieve remarkable things. It is dull,

repetitive. And then the weight is excruciating. And then there's luck. But none of that luck can come into play.

John 13:04

I don't come across Ed Heinschel, the high school coach that took me in in the end. I don't come across him unless I write 3,000 letters. That's it. But it's not hard. It's not magical. It's not legendary.

John 13:21

It's just-

Karam 13:22

People have applied this kind of...

John 13:23

and they do and they're so wrong because what it does is it mythologises excellence in a way that's not useful it's very...

Karam 13:32

So it makes it seem like it's unattainable for the vast majority of people.

John 13:36

And it's not. I mean, there are really practical elements here. So I'm six nine, I was six eight or something at the time. And so being six eight and being able to put six eight into that letter helps, right?

John 13:47

But I do also know of other people who went off to, there's a kid who went to a place called Riorden College, Riorden High School, I'll never forget, Riorden High School in San Francisco. And he was five foot eight.

John 13:59

He was one of my teammates. He just wrote a letter. He just wrote letters. And that's how he got there. Somebody thought, reasonably smart English kid coming to my school, be an interesting cultural exchange.

John 14:12

And I don't think they ever thought anything of it. He never made it to the NBA, nor was he destined to. But boy, did he have an amazing experience for two years in an American high school.

Karam 14:21

And how do you deal with the setbacks within that? So obviously I read, you know, again, when you were 17, 18, perhaps before you went out to America, you had an injury to your, to your hands. You know, you kind of show me now they're still scarring across it.

John 14:32

Chopped my hand off. Yeah. It was not intentional. Yeah, I mean, I fell through a window and cut my hand off. Essentially everything, every dorsal tendon, nerve, artery was completely severed. I was in Anglesey at the time. I was on a biology field trip with my school when it happened and they took me to Bangor Hospital and I wouldn't let them call my mother because I knew she worked really hard and I didn't want her to wake her up in the middle of the night.

John 15:03

But it's just one of those things. It happens, you have to kind of deal with it. It was depressing because I just found this thing where I was around these people who were amazing and now it was all being taken away and I'm a bit of a drama queen.

John 15:18

So I did, I did catastrophise the situation. I mean, it wasn't, I mean, in fairness, it was a pretty catastrophic injury. But, oh yeah, I mean, it's still gone as looks nowadays.

John 15:32

People will move away from me on the tube when they notice. But the, I did create a kind of a mythological catastrophe around it that my life was over and all the things that I loved were going to go away.

John 15:48

My mother was really helpful in just beating the groundedness back into me saying, yeah, no, no. I mean, that some things

are real about this. Is it going to be really painful for the first X number of months?

John 15:59

Yep, as it heals. Is there a chance you'll never get you feeling back in the top of your hand? Yep, that still hasn't come back to this day. Is there a chance you end up with a, what they call a claw hand when the adhesions take place if you don't do your rehab properly and you end up with a hand that won't move?

John 16:16

All of these things are possible. But it also is possible, as has happened, that I am ambidextrous, both in terms of my life and in terms of basketball. So I can work with my left as easy as my right.

John 16:28

And without that, I'm not in the NBA.

Karam 16:31

So you switched, you just go to switch hands.

John 16:32

You have to it needs must for six months seven months. I couldn't do anything but use my left hand. Okay, so what I could do is either do nothing or I could go to the gym and have the most unfulfilling sessions working on a left hand that had been basically a vestige of my thoughts previous and that's what I did

Karam 16:55

And so now you're out in in America in college. You're studying psychology, I believe at the time. Absolutely. And obviously playing on the on the college basketball team, which is a huge thing in in the States.

Karam 17:06

Did you felt like you belong now? Was this the right environment for you? How did it feel?

John 17:11

Yeah, I mean. Being a college athlete, people don't realize in the UK, I suppose, that in America, you are essentially already a mini pro. It's got all the trappings of being professional. You're traveling huge distances to play against neighboring and not so neighboring teams.

John 17:31

Basketball takes up a huge amount of your life. You get up early in the morning and you go to the gym to have a workout, an individual workout. You go to classes, you eat lunch, and then you'll go and lift weights, and then you'll go to some more classes, and then you'll have practice, and then you'll eat with the team, and then you'll sleep, and that's life.

John 17:49

That's the student athlete life. But on a campus of 100,000 people, which is what Penn State is, it's a massive, massive university, everybody knows who you are. You walk everywhere and pretty much whether you have a good game or bad, as long as you work hard, people will yell out your name and want to have your autograph and want to pat you on the back.

Karam 18:13

That must have felt different, obviously talking about being in the UK, being bookish, you know, being in that area, and then all of a sudden you're stressed out.

John 18:20

That didn't change I mean I'm still not much of an interactor with humankind if I can outside of a professional environment we don't it's not that I'm not good at it it's just it's energy expensive so I I still I enjoyed the interaction I enjoyed the recognition but I still you know would rather be in my dorm room and not and not engaging with people unless I had to

Karam 18:47

And then from the college basketball, how did you make the leap into the NBA?

John 18:50

There's a system called a draft, where you are ranked as a player and then the top 50 players get drafted into the NBA. I unfortunately was not listed as one of the top 50 players and I watched players who I knew I was better than get drafted into

the league.

John 19:10

And so I had to go a different route. I had to find myself a new trainer because obviously once you're out of college, you can't continue to use that system. So I found myself a new trainer, essentially had no money, so got into, had to get into debt just to get the trainer to move to Phoenix, Arizona from Toledo, Ohio, where the family that took care of me was, got into about 30 grand's worth of debt really, just to get a flat, a little one bedroom efficiency in the middle of nowhere and a trainer and a car and then just work out like my life depended on it because I knew at the end of that summer, I would have to go to what they call a pre-season camp, which essentially means you and every other wannabe who thinks they have a shot goes and then you eliminate each other for six days.

John 20:09

You work out, you play against each other and every day a manager comes in the locker room and your name is written on tape. Or whether you're there or not. Above your locker and then as you sit in the locker in the mornings, a manager will come and rip off a name and that's how you know you can take the kit that you're wearing and then get going.

John 20:32

And I did that for a week, watching as 30 people was whittled down to about eight and it was whittled down to eight after the last day, we had 10 on the last day, whittled down to eight and then of those eight people, they only took three into the season and I was one of them.

Karam 20:53

I mean, again, what's striking about this is the perseverance and the self-belief in it. Or does it not feel like that to you? Do you just feel like you're doing what you think you should be doing? You're following the steps to achieve your goals.

John 21:07

I mean, I feel like if we were trying to talk, if we're trying to give advice to our children, I feel like isn't that just the advice you'd give or you work as hard as you can, control what you can control, prepare with real skill and foresight.

John 21:25

It just feels like that's what you do. Know yourself, know your weaknesses and strengths and play to your strengths, but practice on your weaknesses. It just, I mean, this is like, it's almost bordering on sophistry, isn't it really?

John 21:41

It's just, it's like it's in the middle of a fortune cookie. It's that ridiculous. But there's nothing complex about it. Again, if you can, I continue to come back to this point that if you can tolerate mundanity, the repetitiveness required in order to be really good at something, you can achieve almost anything, because it is just that.

John 22:13

Can you just be diligent and practice with real focus and execution, very discreet, often boring skills, then you can be good, really good.

Karam 22:29

I want to, I want to look now kind of at the, the kind of ethics and perhaps from the principles that underlie you personally and that business leaders can use in their organisations. Um, I mean, the principles seem to be a big thing to you.

Karam 22:44

Obviously I read while in the NBA, you, you kind of famously turned down a contract with the LA Lakers, uh, for \$17 million was it? To stay with your team at the time as a matter of principle. Yes. Do you, I mean, what was that about?

Karam 23:00

What was the principle and how important was it to be able to stick to that?

John 23:03

Um, well, I mean, principles are everything. Um, my, you know, my mother always used to say, you can't be a part-time person of principle. Um, and it's true the moment, the moment you buck the trend of being principled, you are no longer principled.

John 23:20

That's what people do in business and outside of business. We are principled when people are watching and that's not principle. We are principled when the stakes are low. When we have to give up something that is relatively meaningless to us, but the moment something's really important to us, all of a sudden, that's the real test of principle that you still behave in that way that is, that is, that is important and then incongruent with you and congruent with your values at that point.

John 23:47

And so for me, I wanted to play for the Lakers. It was the team I'd always wanted to play for. I knew they'd win four championships, but I also knew that the year before the magic were the only team to give me a shot in the NBA.

John 24:01

Uh, they had given me my chance to rise to prominence. And whilst I knew that there was no guarantee, in fact, I thought pretty likely that they would dump me the year afterwards when they had more money in under the cap to get a new player, a better player, I knew they'd do that.

John 24:16

But this is the difference between, that's why we always highlight this to our clients, right? There's a big difference between loyalty and principle, and you should always try and engender principle because loyalty is a, is a short-term thing.

John 24:34

Loyalty implies keeping tabs of favors. Like I do this for you because at some stage in the future you'll do this for somebody else. And I think that is nowhere near as personally satisfying, nor is it anywhere near as useful as just having people in your organisation, you just behave congruently because that's who they are.

John 24:51

That's what they stand for. So for me, I didn't want to turn down the Lakers. I really wanted to go to the Lakers. They showed me a house that I could have bought on the beach. I remember going there and watching the waves crash, watching the surfers surf in the front, and he pointed out that one of the coaches lives just around the corner and Shaq lives over there.

John 25:13

And I was like, this would be amazing. For what? You had this voice in the back of your head. It's everything that I wanted, but you can't be a part-time man of principle. The Orlando Magic asked me to stay.

John 25:24

They did not give me any caveats or promises or anything else. They did point out that they'd been the only team that had seen my potential. And I thought, yeah, that's fair. So I stay.

Karam 25:41

Why do you think then so many other people in business and in life aren't as principled? I mean, trust in organisations, whether it be business, politics, media.

John 25:49

This is why loyalty is no good, because loyalty requires trust. Principle only requires trust in me.

Host 25:55

Okay.

John 25:56

I knew the Orlando magic the moment I said yes would be looking around for who would be the best power forward option, my position option for them the year afterwards. I was no, I'm not an idiot. I was aware that I'm not the best power forward in the NBA at that stage.

John 26:10

I was good, but I was certainly not the best power forward in the NBA. And I knew that it was likely that they would be looking for the best power forward in the NBA they could afford, which would be more than me, better than me.

John 26:23

But principle isn't about them, it's about me. Principle is about when people ask me now, when I work with clients on

something super sensitive and it never seems enough that I am tied to all the ethics requirements of every psychologist and therefore could lose my license if I did something unethical.

John 26:42

But the thing that always seems to get people is when I, they most people know about this story, when they do rudimentary research, apparently it's one of the things that comes up early. And it seems to give people great solace that when you ask, what is my word worth?

John 26:58

My word is worth \$20 million. That seems to give people some solace. If you'd actually turned down real tangible money, turned down championships, turned down this idealised picture of what he wants, then maybe when he works with us, we can trust this guy.

Karam 27:16

Do you think that means that people haven't got their own principles in order?

John 27:18

I don't know whether they do or they don't, but I know that all that matters is that I do. I will tell people how I'll operate with them. I will tell them, you know, the sessions, we do a lot of sessions that are Chatham House rule so that we can gather information from people with full confidence from them that nothing they say will be attributed or come back to bite them.

John 27:41

And we work with a lot of organisations, unfortunately, who still think that when I, it's just a narrative line that I tell to people and I inform them that, no, it's not a narrative line. You will never know who I spoke to.

John 27:56

If you try and monitor that, then that's the kind of thing that would force this agreement to end because all that matters is I have principle because it's my job to monitor. I can't control what other people do.

Karam 28:08

And for the businesses, what are the challenges that you see them facing?

John 28:12

I mean, the ongoing drop in engagement that appears to be happening in a lot of businesses is a function of trust. It's a function of inauthenticity. It's a function of an incongruence between what organisations say is the experience that people can expect within an organisation and what is actually delivered as the experience.

John 28:33

So there's lots of ways that principle would have an impact on those elements. So it's not this is not really esoteric. It's really practical. If you promise a certain type of experience, people then deliver on that experience or stop promising it.

John 28:47

So there are two options. You can either work on your culture, your leadership to ensure that you live up to the beautiful stuff that nearly every organisation has on their website or change what's on your website.

John 28:59

So you're not lying to people. This is this is people think this is a millennial thing. It's not a millennial thing. The boomers are simply a in positions of leadership. And so for them, maybe it's less important coming towards the end of their careers.

John 29:13

So they feel they have, you know, less time that they have to ignore this incongruence. Millennials have loads of time. The centennials and zeds who are coming after them have even more time. And they're about tired of having people lie to them.

John 29:30

And I don't think that's crazy.

Karam 29:32

No, and it seems to be a wider societal thing as well, you know, we see it in the policy.

John 29:37

Trust in most institutions in politics is dissipating fast but it is still about the same congruence right we care about all our citizens but then we secretly find out Windrush a generation of being thrown out of the country and deported even though they're British citizens we care about all our citizens and a year after Grenfell you still have people who aren't permanently housed we care about all our citizens and then this is what's happening with the NHS you care about all it's an incongruence between what's said and what matters we want we want strong borders and whatever else and then you know everything is an incongruence and so no wonder people are losing trust and faith

Karam 30:19

Why do you think we feel this need to lie about these things? Or do you think we just need to be feel like we're constantly talking?

John 30:24

No, lying is easier. I think sometimes it feels I think it feels to people like if I can say the right thing, then I have avoided an awkward moment right now. Whereas if I tell the truth, I have created for me work that I am now going to be held accountable to.

John 30:42

You know, I don't know. I can't even think about some one example might be, but appraisal, appraisal, appraisal is broadly broken in every organisation. I understand why it's necessary, but it doesn't work.

John 31:00

It's a contrivance now. It's a way that we can manage out really bad talent, though we should be able to do that without a number. And it's a way for us to make sure that some people are not remunerated anymore.

John 31:14

It's a way to make sure we remunerate some people who would otherwise leave. But it's a contrivance and people are frustrated by the fact that their experience with this kind of normal curve of appraisal doesn't deliver on the promise that they were told.

John 31:32

You look on most of the websites of companies now, we're going to take an interest in your career. You're going to find people, seeing people who will sponsor and mentor you. And the way we appraise doesn't match up with that feedback they get doesn't match up with that.

John 31:45

How often do you hear people say, well, I had a one-to-one with somebody, but he told me that everything was fine. And then I came to my appraisal and I got a three or a two, and I don't understand how can one experience not match the other?

John 31:58

Well, that's because lying about it to the face of a person avoids and saying, yeah, yeah, you're doing fine, avoids that hour of discomfort. And then the punishing blow that that person receives is delivered by a machine.

Karam 32:15

So your advice is bring that honesty back.

John 32:18

Tell the truth. If you can't have and I really think we should stop calling them these but if you can't have a difficult conversation with people you shouldn't be a leader, you shouldn't be a named leader, you shouldn't be a leader in an organisation. The very minimum mundane requirement of a leader is to be able to have honest difficult conversations. I like you, we go for a drink after work sometimes, but there's no getting away from the fact that your performance in the last six weeks has slipped radically.

John 32:49

I want to know first if there's some circumstance in your life that I don't know about you don't have to share that with me but I think it's important to know if there's something going on. If there isn't I think it's important for you to know that this kind of slip in performance can't be tolerated regardless of my friendship with you nor will my friendship with you be

protective of this. That's an honest conversation that says I give a damn about you but I cannot lie about what's going on.

John 33:19

It also says I do care if you're dealing with an ailing parent, if you're a carer for somebody, if your relationship has had a difficulty and I'm doing it in a way that says you don't have to share any of that with me I just want to know the truth about if that's happening, let's see how we can arrange to give you some space. And to me I mean the people in HR they always get left with that like that's their job but it's not it's the direct line manager that should be able to have that conversation, and then HR should be left to help with you know mental health first aid or whoever an organisation uses, or referral to coaching, or referral to another pathway through the NHS or private if the company has that.

John 34:02

It just seems like there's there's a really honest interaction with somebody who deserves the best possible opportunity to thrive.

Karam 34:12

And so how can making these principle decisions create more positive outcomes then? You know, that sounds like one tangible way of doing it. Are there other methods that you can show, other ways that people could bring that into the work?

John 34:25

I think sometimes it's easier to have honest principle conversations if you do it more regularly. So we we really recommend APS always recommends micro appraisals. OK, the idea that you I mean, I don't I don't know how familiar people are with them, but it's probably simply the idea that that you have West Wing style conversations and they are predicated by one thing.

John 34:48

I noticed something. So whether it's in a meeting and there's another client there that you know well. And somebody new to the organisation or new to this client speaks up in a certain way, and afterwards you might say to them, I hear what you're saying with that.

John 35:02

I just want you to know my experience with Mr. X is that he doesn't respond well to this. You've given them in that moment. I noticed something and I'm I'm not letting you get trampled by something, some information you don't have.

John 35:17

When somebody brings up an idea in a meeting and it's like, you know, I know you I've never thought of that. It's really brilliant. You know, is there some way that we can explore that? It just feels like, yeah, she's had a great idea.

John 35:31

How many times do people have great ideas and then somebody else steals it? Doesn't give them the attribution, doesn't even give them the credit for it. And suddenly it's run away from them before they know it.

John 35:40

And it's not that everybody should take ownership of and of every idea, but get a little credit for it. Just seems like this stuff is the simplest kind of interpersonal. This is it.

Karam 35:51

It feels like almost we're in the workplace. We're still children, we're still teenagers. We're not developed as adults the way we would hope to interact outside the world. And it just seems strange that we haven't been able to develop that in the workplace.

Karam 36:03

Or do you think we've regressed?

John 36:05

I don't think we've regressed. I mean, I just I don't think it's ever been really good there has been something quite transactional analysis of the of the interaction between managers and their reports which has been almost parent to child in the arrangement instead of peer-to-peer.

John 36:25

But it's not new, I just think there's real, there's real comfort in in rank. In being a you know I'm a director of what is now the country's largest NHS trust and you know, there are lots of different bands in the NHS and it's not uncommon for a band five nurses who is your staff nurse to feel like they can't comment to a band eight nurse on something that they see, and to us we can't allow that because that's patient safety as a key.

John 36:59

And in organisations how many great ideas insights prescience of challenges and problems are lost because the person's only been here two years and you've really got to get your feet wet before I want to hear from you in a meeting. It just seems so dumb to allow..

Karam 37:15

It frustrates you

John 37:17

To allow tradition to allow formality to allow malfunction, you know malfunctioning tradition to impact performance doesn't make any sense to me. I want the best ideas presented always, if somebody sees an angle of the challenge that I don't see they must tell me. If they don't they're abdicating their responsibility and if I'm not facilitating it, I'm not doing my job and I should be punished for that I'm the person that the buck stops with, I'm the person that can never run away from responsibility for outcomes.

John 37:56

I am the person that when the gale blows I stand as the as the blocker and my people can stand in my lee. I'm the person that when credit shines I have to make sure I get out the way, because there's nothing worse than being a solar panel for praise, right?

John 38:17

I think the only person that gets it while everybody else is standing in the shadow. That's especially important for a company that has my name in it. It's my job to challenge my people to develop themselves. You know one of my one of my colleagues has gone from being the person who is in charge of our website to being one of our key client-facing coaches over the course of three years. Not because we don't need our website done.

John 38:45

We just have somebody else who does that now. And does our social media stuff but because it was just very clear from the moment we started that A she had an aptitude and B had a real skill for this work that she hadn't necessarily been trained to at that point So we did we got her involved in training so that now three years later a role that doesn't resemble where she came started from and it's not because we're intuitive and innovative and all that nonsense.

John 39:17

It is simply every person every person who comes to work in good consciousness with should have that kind of lens offered them. The idea that well you may have come in in this silo of this business, but it seems like you've got real aptitude here and if there's an interest then we'll facilitate that. It doesn't matter if you're a team of 15 like us or a team of you know tens of thousands like the big consultancies out there. Brand leadership is about ethical the ethical stance. My kids once, I remember coming back home and seeing them with a WWJD bracelet on. My family is not religious and so I was like what the hell is that what are you doing with that?

John 40:06

And they were like, what would John do? As I was quite moved by it really because it's it's the idea of that's also what leadership is people being able to say with real clarity of insight under X circumstances John would do this and it doesn't mean you have to do that same thing, but it means you always know where I would stand

Karam 40:30

So you've been called a lot of things in your life. You know, you've been recognised in a lot of ways. You're an NBA star. You're a psychologist. You're an entrepreneur. You're a black man. You're a gay man.

Karam 40:41

How do you view yourself? How would you, what would you like your legacy to be? How would you?

John 40:45

Oh I don't worry about that, legacy it's a wonderfully subjective thing, I'll get better when I die. Everybody does...

Karam 40:57

A man of principal?

John 40:59

Yeah, I mean, I suppose that'd be nice to be known as that now rather than when I pop my clogs. You know, we all have, all of us in the business have business cards that have our title on, but then also have our real title on.

John 41:16

So mine, obviously I'm the CEO of this organisation or managing director, depending on your perspective. But my title is Everyday Jedi. That's who I am. People who interact with me know that I am here with them in this moment, present, interested and engaged in solving whatever challenge it is that's in front of me.

John 41:40

People here know that I will use every skill and every attention that I have to this, the furthering of that. And there's something a little bit magic about it, which I enjoy. But that's, that's, you know, I'm the Everyday Jedi.

Karam 41:57

John, thank you for joining us. Pleasure.

Host 42:03

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