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A conversation with Ed O'Malley and Julia Fabris McBride, authors of
When Everyone Leads: How Tough Challenges Get Seen and Solved

1. **What is the distinction between leadership and authority?**

   Ed O'Malley: Leadership and authority are fundamental to everything we're introducing in the book. Leadership is an activity and authority is a position. That might not sound revolutionary, but that totally turns the world of leadership and management on its head. Leadership is an activity that somebody does, authority is a role that somebody plays.

2. **What is "The Gap" and how can organizations overcome it?**

   Julia Fabris McBride: Every person, every institution, every community has its concerns and issues that have been plaguing them for years, sometimes decades. And every person, every team, every group has big bold aspirations that sometimes we're even afraid to talk about. Between those concerns and those big, bold aspirations is The Gap. The Gap is the place where leadership happens. The Gap is where we face the things that get in the way of progress. It's leadership that helps people navigate The Gap, brings others along through The Gap, and achieves those bold aspirations.

3. **What is the difference between an adaptive challenge and a technical problem?**

   Ed: An adaptive challenge is one that has no easy answer or solution. For example, what exactly is the challenge with not enough school kids reading at grade level? Is it the teacher's fault, parents' fault, society's fault? We might disagree on what even the challenge is, let alone what the solution might be. A technical problem, however, might be really hard to solve, but somebody knows how to solve it. There is an expert or someone with authority who can do it themselves. Adaptive challenges require lots of leadership from lots of people. Technical problems don't.

4. **What does leadership "from the many, not the few" look like?**

   Julia: Leadership from the many, not the few looks like people headed in the same direction, differently. Say I want to improve outcomes at the fifth-grade level. That looks like different people exercising leadership on that challenge – the school board does what the school board can do, the superintendent does what the superintendent can do, the teacher in the classroom does what they can do, and the parents and students do what they can do. We energize people to exercise leadership within their sphere of influence. When that happens, when we get leadership by the many, not the few, we make a different kind of progress.

5. **What's the benefit of accepting loss as part of change?**

   Julia: The benefit of accepting loss as part of change is that counterintuitively we move faster when we acknowledge loss. When we bring that into the room or into the conversation, it's energizing for people to be seen and to be acknowledged instead of what we normally do, which

is gloss over loss and try to get to the gold. If we're talking about The Gap, we try to hop from concerns to aspirations without dealing with what people care about that's holding us in place.

6. **How can you authorize yourself to lead?**

   Ed: The first thing you have to do to authorize yourself to lead is break apart the distinction between authority and leadership. It's hard to authorize yourself to lead because you can get stuck thinking, "Do I have enough authority to do this?" But leadership is an activity, it can be done by anyone.

   Step two is realizing you might not have influence over everybody to solve a problem. But you do have influence over some people, and you can at least start to exercise leadership with them. Don't do nothing because there are people, even key people, that you don't have influence over. You have influence more than you realize. Use it.

7. **What happens when we adopt the challenge-centric model of leadership rather than person-centric?**

   Julia: When you adopt the challenge-centric model, many more people are activated to become part of the process of discovery, experimentation, and adaptation. You start thinking about people who are connected to the challenge or have a stake in the outcome, but maybe don't have their voices in the conversation or even have a stake at the table right now. You realize that key stakeholders with influence over change need to be actively involved to make progress. When you adopt the challenge-centric model, you acknowledge that a few people at the top can't solve the problem for everybody, but that if more people and groups connected to the challenge work on it in their own way and within their own influence, we'll see more progress.

8. **Why is the "great leader" a myth?**

   Julia: Maybe it's my background in theater, but I know that it takes a team to do something great. It takes the playwright, it takes the group of people who's going to come together for six weeks and jam on an idea, and then it takes the director to line that up into something that makes a play. It takes all of us showing up every night, ready to rehearse. It takes a lighting designer, a marketer, the theater owner, and then you have great art or really bad art. But one great leader? Nothing.

9. **What is "the heat" in your model of leadership? Why is it needed for change?**

   Ed: I was in a meeting recently with about 20 people in positions of authority who focus on ending hunger. David Beasley, the head of the world food program, was in this meeting. We were all talking about what we could do to end hunger in our state. There wasn't any heat until one woman, who was one of the few grassroots-type people there, spoke up and said, "I don't think we're going to figure out how to make progress if we don't have more people around the table who are like me, dealing with poverty personally and working daily with people who are hungry and in poverty." That's heat, and it changed the tenor of that conversation.

When everyone leads, that means there are lots of people who can do what that one individual did, raise the heat to help the group be more productive than they were before.

10. How is leadership like improvisational comedy?

Ed: I had a brief but meaningful stint as an improvisational comedy team member when I was in college and I was not the funny one, but I benefited significantly from that experience and it taught me lots of things including that you really have to trust the group and you have to trust that when everyone is doing their part, incredible things can happen. I think leadership in solving tough challenges or seizing important opportunities is like that. It's when everyone leads, it's when everyone is doing their part, that you make progress.

Julia: Improv is always about listening and learning from other people. It's about being willing to bomb and learn. It's about not getting attached to the outcome, but getting attached to what's next, what we're learning, what we can do together. Whether I'm playing the role of Hamlet in an all-female production in Chicago as I did, or whether I'm sitting around a table trying to make progress on a tough challenge, I am thinking about how we get everyone pointed in the same direction differently.

11. How can we cultivate a culture of experimentation?

Ed: The way you cultivate a culture of experimentation is to cultivate a culture where people know that the exercise of leadership is expected of them and that the exercise of leadership is about being experimental.

Julia: I was just with a group of hospital administrators who were having big ahas about how they can shift from taking it all on themselves to encouraging experimentation. The key is always asking the question, "What did you learn?" instead of "Did it succeed, or did it fail?"

12. How can people in positions of authority make leadership less risky for others?

Ed: This question makes me think of an incredible young man named Thomas Stanley, who we lost over three years ago. Thomas started working for us when he was right out of college. He was this shaggy haired, sloppily dressed young professional with a huge heart and a great mind. He cared so much about the organization that he wouldn't abide by the organizational norms that govern what people think they're supposed to do in a meeting or in a group setting. He would do whatever he thought needed to be done to make progress. And sometimes he'd really piss people off along the way. For example, he'd wait until the end of a meeting to ask a big question that demanded an answer. Those of us like Julia and myself, who were in positions of authority, protected Thomas. What he was doing was so much more valuable than any of the downsides it was creating. I think we made it less risky for Thomas – and then, by extension, to others – to exercise leadership. If you want a culture of everyone leading and everyone exercising leadership beyond going outside what's expected of them, you have to protect those folks who started doing it first.

13. What does it mean to "intervene skillfully?"

Julia: Intervene skillfully means to think about the challenge at the center and the multiple interpretations or perspectives surrounding that challenge. Bring all your knowledge and skills and experience to think about who needs to be engaged to move that challenge forward and think carefully, but boldly, about how you're going to engage each of those factions and empower them, understanding that things are going to shift and change.

Ed: Leadership is about making a very conscious set of choices about how to intervene to give ourselves the best chance of leading the progress, which isn't how most people intervene. Most people intervene based on what they're feeling, what they're thinking, or what they're passionate about. And being loud or talking often doesn't mean you're effective. Intervening skillfully is the thoughtful, deliberate practice of somebody skillfully exercising leadership. When everyone is skilled in that type of skillful intervention, you get so much more done as an organization.

14. What is one step everyone can take today to engage in leadership?

Julia: Everyone can ask a question they don't know the answer to.

Ed: I once had the chance to visit with Wes Jackson, a great environmentalist in Kansas. I asked him a question and his initial response was, "That's a really great question and it's a great question because it doesn't have an exact answer." I think when we get everybody asking those types of questions, that means you're illuminating the things that really need to be worked on and discovered and advanced. And that's the key to progress.