# Learning Leadership Podcast

## Transcript: Episode 1 - Liz Kislik - Engagement and Communication In a Remote Work Environment

**Will:** **We're in a very interesting season at the moment in the world of business, with a lot of remote teams, which are working online, geographically dispersed. Some are doing so because of the pandemic, and others are simply part of this remote work trend that has been on a rise for years. So what can we do to engage people better?**

Liz Kislik: I think the first thing is to actually pay attention to people as individual human beings, to get away from the idea of "workforce" and to think about the actual employees. It's very hard to be engaged if you don't actually believe that someone cares about you. Regarding remote work, we might be seeing a lot of hybrid situations, which become even more challenging. I think we have to pay attention to our people and actually be in touch with them in specific concrete ways so that they recognize that we know who they are, they are not anonymous, they are not just part of a mass, and that leaders actually care enough to check in with them with frequency.

A couple of years ago, at many companies, leaders often did not meet one-on-one with their people more than once a month. That's unacceptable now. You won't know what's happening with people and they won't understand what they really need to be dealing with, what to be setting as their priorities, what to be emphasizing. And so, people can start to feel lost and settle down into a sort of inert, unexciting state, thinking *"What does it matter what I do? Nobody really cares about me."*

So the first thing is actually leadership presence and attention.

**Will:** **Speaking of care, two questions come up. First, why does care matter more now than a few years ago? And second, since everybody wants to be cared for in their own way, how does this customization change or become more important in leadership?**

Liz Kislik: To answer the first question, I think it was always important, but leaders could get away with not being as personally attached and personally available. As working people, we had certain expectations of what the workplace demanded from us, and many people thought they were stuck and they just had to put up with not feeling good at work.

The human need for care and attention is ever present. The difference is that in this period, we've really seen how much it matters: people suffer when they feel detached from their community, their workplace, and when they feel alone with hardships. Workplaces where

leaders are paying attention and are seeking out their team members, being more personal than they perhaps used to be, get better results. When you show you care, your workforce responds.

And so, rather than the need for care being different, I think the difficult and challenging times has shown workers, executives included, how much better it feels when you have a sense of community at work, as opposed to work being the place where you deliver on certain things, and all your gratification and ego satisfaction comes from outside of work. When you're working from home, sometimes Zoom is the only place you see people. That kind of connection has become more important and people feel more strongly about it being done well.

That takes us to the second part, about the kind and the nature of caring and how you actually show it. If we go by the old premise that what gets measured gets done, then we should schedule and take actual time for talking to people. Seeing how they're doing on their work and their projects, but also how their health is, how the health of their loved ones is, what's going on at home - these kinds of markers of actual concern for the human being go a long way. It doesn't always have to be face-to-face or Zoom, lovely notes can work too.

**Will:** **That's a great segue into the next part of that question. You were saying that creating more personal bonds at work also helps people deal with or manage stress and burnout. Can you tell us a little bit more about that and how it also strengthens that one-on-one relationship, in return?**

**Liz Kislik:** I think the issue of burnout is that there's been a lot of burden - care for loved ones, for our own health - and anxiety levels have risen. At the beginning of the pandemic, there were some people who, as a kind of coping mechanism, worked all the time, were more productive than they had ever been, and other people who withdrew. Then, some of the people who came on strong out of the gate, later on started to feel a little detached or less engaged or burning out from just working all the time, not having the limits of leaving work and going home. Not having that kind of differentiation in their own minds, they were always on.

When going through this, one thing that is very helpful is if the leader explains what's expected, but also what's tolerated, like for example, letting people know that if, say, during a Zoom meeting, they have things going on in the background and it's inconvenient for them, it's okay to turn their camera off for a while, so that they don't feel distressed and self-conscious.

Another thing is letting people have more control over their schedules. If they can deliver, let them call that shot. Making sure that people take vacation, that they are not sending emails at odd hours - leaders have to model such behavior. You might have a brilliant thought at 11 o'clock at night. Write the email, but schedule it to be sent during work hours. Don't send it right away just because you're excited, because someone else who's up may feel obligated to answer. Help people maintain boundaries.

Leaders can talk about how they're spending time with their families or on their hobbies and show that they are not always on in terms of work. They can talk about how they are preparing to manage their work so that they can take a vacation, and they hope that their team members are too. The idea is to share what's going on and then let the others speak too - *"I understand that it's stressful for you. I've had that kind of experience. Also tell me specifically, what's going on with you?"* - because sometimes, when a leader is trying to share, they may actually err too much on the side of their own sharing and the way that they do it, and that may actually shut the employee down. So the leader can open it up a little bit, but it shouldn't be about the leader.

**Will: Let's move into the situation when there is conflict. Even more with remote teams, conflict might not be as evident as it was before. A team member might have an attitude and conflict has been caused. How should a manager deal with such a person? What is your view on that?**

**Liz Kislik:** I'm going to treat the person with an attitude a little separately from the conflict itself, because when somebody has an attitude (I'm going to take that to mean they don't behave in the way that we want them to), they may come across in some negative way, they may seem resistant, or they may not speak compassionately to other people. So if that's what's going on, there are a couple of possibilities.

Our attitudes come from our behaviors and our beliefs about what's going on. So if somebody started out positive, congenial and collaborative, and now they have an attitude, a leader should be concerned. They should ask themselves *"What did we do to contribute to that? Is there something in the way I'm managing this person that has caused them to have these negative responses?",* because those kinds of responses either come from negative feelings, or are they suffering in some way in their personal lives.

Sometimes, in the flow of the work day, a little negativity might not have been so noticeable if there were other positive people around or other positive things happening. Or, no one may raise little bits of conflict as an issue, because they don't want to make a big deal out of it. And so, there's this low level of conflict simmering underneath that might shoot out all of a sudden. And that may be where you see the attitude - when someone's just had too much, or they feel you're asking for too much change all at once, or there's some new project or priority and they're stressed.

It all comes down to the same basics, as with anything else. I wouldn't generally call somebody on negative behavior or attitude in a meeting, but after the meeting I would follow up with them. And the first thing I'd ask them is: *"Are you okay? Because in our last meeting, I noticed that when this thing happened, here's how you reacted, and either you didn't use to react that way, so I was concerned something wasn't okay, or you've been reacting that way more often, you seem more worried that things will not work well, or you seem more resistant to the new kinds of things we're trying to put in, and I'm concerned. Is there something in the way that I'm not aware of? Are there problems behind the scenes that we need to work on? Please tell me what's going on."*

Open the conversation with open-ended general questions, ask what is concerning, and then, although difficult, wait and give the person time to respond.

**Will: Questions like: *"Is there something going on that I have not seen yet?"* are more work-related questions, either implicitly or explicitly. When working online/remotely, the reasons why that conflict has been simmering may differ. It may be a private situation, or simply an uncomfortable setting in the home office. So what are some questions that people can be asking to figure out where the conflict resides, in a hybrid/remote working scenario.**

Liz Kislik: If you've built trust, those original conversation questions don't have to be just work-related. If you've got a good working relationship with someone, when you say: *"Tell me what's going on, you see more on edge than usual"*, theoretically, they would already know that you care about them as a whole person.

And theoretically, you should already know something about what their work environment is like and possibly even where they're living and what that's been like for them. And whether there have been health issues, I would hope you would know some of that. And if you do, you could check specifically on something.

Here's something that I've heard come up multiple times in the last year or so: pet deaths during this time. People are wrecked by this. If you know that somebody has a pet that wasn't doing so well, ask about the dog. This is about work, too, because we bring our whole selves wherever we go. We may not want to share all of that, but it's with us. And so, if you know that somebody is stressed because their animal is not feeling well, or they're planning their son's wedding and they had to postpone it three times, use that as a bridge to say, *"How are things going with your family event? How is your elderly parent?"* Those are like little stepping stones across this river of stress or negativity to show some human connection.

You may be saying, *"You seem more on edge or tenser than you had a few weeks ago. Tell me a little about what's on your plate. Is it reasonable to be doing everything you're doing? Is there extra support you need? Are there tools you need? Are you getting the responses you need from other people in the organization? Tell me about what's happening in your work day."* You can bring the discussion back to work, but you want to be clear that you actually want to know about what their experience is, what's really going on. They don't just have to look like everything's fine.

**Will: With a number of leaders I've been coaching over the last 18 months, I noticed that there are more questions on passive defensive behavior, which basically means that people don't really bring up their issues. What are some ways to get behind that professional, but passive defensive behavior?**

Liz Kislik: It really depends on how well you know the person and how much trust you've built in the past. So let me start with the assumption that we know each other well.

I might say, *"I feel like there's something you're not telling me because I've seen you when you're upbeat and optimistic and I'm seeing you now, and it's not the way you seem. So if it's*

*personal and you don't want to tell me, that's fine. I hope you're working on it. I hope you know that if you want to talk about needing some time off or getting some support through our various support channels, I'm happy to talk about that.*

*If it's about work and it affects the work, I'm counting on you to tell me, because it's my job, actually, to make sure that you have what you need to get the work done and that there are not unnecessary things in your way. If there's something going on that is appropriate for you to tell me, because it's about the work, I really am counting on you.*

*It doesn't have to be this minute. You may want to think about how you want to do it, but I'm going to ask you again. So think about how you could share with me, what would make it better. You don't have to tell me every little bit about what's bothering you. I understand that, but I really want to know what would make a difference. That would be helpful to you."*

**Will:** That's fantastic. Very well articulated. And there's quite a number of questions you can either use, combined or dissected. I've been working in North America, Europe, Asia, Middle East, Australia - all across the Globe - and what you just shared would work everywhere.

**I had the pleasure to coach a Cuban executive who was working in China for many years and many other places around the world. He would always say, *"If you treat people like people, it always works wherever you are."***

**Liz Kislik:** If I may add something to that - treating people like people doesn't always mean treating them the way you would want to be treated. Many executives who are not as experienced in this kind of deeper human interaction, when they want to do the right thing, they ask themselves, *"How would I respond? Okay, let me work in that vein."* And sometimes it doesn't work and then they feel like they shouldn't reach out anymore, because it didn't work. They don't really realize there are basic human things that are the same for all of us, but we don't all have the same experiences and we don't all have the same mindset.

I think it is very important to keep it more open and express pretty explicitly that I care about what you care about, because I care about you. So tell it to me in any way that works for you. It's harder, it can make leaders very uncomfortable because they're afraid of emotional reactions. And it's particularly hard on Zoom. In an office you can say, "Let me get you some water while you put yourself back together. And then we'll talk about it some more", and you can actually walk away. But on Zoom, you can say, "Do you want to take a minute, turn off your camera? Or we can convene again", but you don't know if they're going to come right back.

If you can pat someone's shoulder, or simply reach across, without touching, it would make a difference. One of the things that people can think about is actually leaning closer to the camera and even reaching out a little bit to show they're trying to bridge the gap.

**Will:** It really works because people feel like they're having a normal conversation, right?

**Liz Kislik:** Oh goodness. Yes.

**Will:** Shifting the discussion to cognitive biases that people may have, conflict may arise from situations where somebody thinks they're a great performer, but they're not. How would you deal with such people or situations?

**Liz Kislik:** Thinking that you're doing better than you are - the Dunning-Kruger effect - is just like an added layer on top of the challenge of dealing with somebody who isn't doing well.

And you are so right, any kind of incompetence or underperformance creates a mess inside the kinds of collaborations we need to do. When your work colleague is not giving what you need from them, that's a struggle. And then, if they walk around saying they're doing great, that becomes offensive and it feeds the conflict.

Going back to the basics, I would ask what are the things we need to get accomplished? How are we accomplishing them? I try to stay away from asking why this happened or why it didn't happen, which can sometimes impute motive. Motive may characterize people as if they are good or bad, and that becomes offensive and puts fuel on the fire.

So it is best to stick to clarifying what is expected, and how we can make it happen in a better way. This way, it's much more concrete and about the work itself. By going back and revisiting, "What are the deliverables for the project? When are they due? Who is responsible for which pieces" - sometimes, without even pointing out the underperformer, it becomes clear who is lagging behind, and you can tell them, in a more neutral way, *"Here's this piece that you haven't tackled yet, please get to it."*

More often than we would think, it turns out that people's expectations about how work should be done don't match yours, or the client's, or the stakeholder's. And so, it is the responsibility of the leader, or the coach for the leader in effect, to be clear about the specifics of the expectations, which might be as simple as a presentation format or making it clear that this audience prefers a two page executive summary, whereas that audience, if you don't give them the whole report, they don't trust your summary. With someone who doesn't perform well, it can be very helpful to actually break the project assignment down into the specifics and review them concretely, making sure you have agreement. That's one way to approach this type of situation.

Another type of situation may be handled by looking at the way you have to correct the work, and explaining the correction. You might also ask questions like, *"Tell me how you came to decide that it should be this way, because I was thinking it should be that way. So explain to me the choices you made and we'll talk it through. And then I may ask you to redo it the way I was thinking, because that's the way we've been successful delivering it in the past."*

The idea is to look into and take apart the process, as opposed to telling the person their work is bad.

**Will:** So what you are saying is, for one, to make sure you have agreement on what success looks like, perhaps smart goals or smart objectives, and then clarify the process.

Now, when people are in the office, it is much easier to see their input and where they are in the process, but when working online, that visibility is gone. Even more so during these challenging times, with the uncertainty of what's ahead, there's a lot more input required at the moment to get things done. People might feel like they made the necessary effort, but the results were beyond their control, which technically means they are underperforming. In the office, we can talk about it and look at it together. There's a much broader spectrum of communication because we can see, touch, and feel things and work things together.

**In our current virtual world, on the other hand, we're having these conceptual ideas that we're throwing at each other through text or video. So a lot of things get lost in communication. How to deal with that?**

**Liz Kislik:** There's a proverb that goes like, *"If you didn't plant trees years ago, the best time is now."* If you didn't work on trust in relationships in the past and parameters of working together, there's no time like now to start, to think about it and be conscious of it.

That's a general statement. Let me give you some specifics. So you talked about the lack of visibility we have today. Well, we have a lack of casual visibility. I can't walk down the hall and stick my head in your office, but we can have planned visibility as much as we need. I do this with some clients and colleagues. Sometimes it's great to get on some kind of video chat process; turn your sound off and just work together so that you could interrupt to ask a question. When you know your colleague is there, there is something called the audience effect. We work better when we are in the presence of others. It keeps us on track and on target, there are groups doing this internationally. So there are ways to substitute for the lack of physical proximity. That's important. If you do that with regularity, it becomes the norm. Then, you can trade ideas back and forth, and you can be working in multiple channels at once. You might be texting your colleague, and then turning the microphone on when needed.

Another thing you made me think about was the idea that because we're not as casually together, corrections may feel more onerous. First of all, we could just do it by me talking to you about it, or I might edit it and share it on screen and talk it through. I would show you the reasoning behind the corrections, as opposed to just sending it to you and leaving you in the dark to sort it out yourself.

Going back to the case where a person really doesn't know that their work is not good enough, I might say, "I changed this section and put it over here and don't forget, we need to report on the ABC situation etc." At the end of the conversation, I can ask, "*I wanted to check, because I think we went over this when we first talked about the project. So tell me, was I not clear that we would need X, Y, and Z, because in my notes, I seem to have covered it. Tell me how I could do that better so it would be clear to you. I'm concerned because this is the third report where the parameters I laid out in the beginning were not fully met. I want to talk about how we could break it down so that it would be easier and more straightforward for you.*"

One of the things that's really crucial when someone is not accomplishing the work successfully is not to overlook it. The first time, no big deal. The second time also, you don't

need to worry about it, but in my world, three is a pattern. And as soon as you have a pattern, if you don't address it, then it's on you. Then you have permitted that and they become confident that what they are doing must be all right, because you didn't raise the issue. To find a way to raise it, of course, in a way that is as non-threatening and supportive as possible, is important, and then if you see no change, you really have to go into a kind of counseling mode.

Will: As you were talking, two things that really stood out to me are creating more planned visibility moments and the idea of having people next to each other on video. We do that ourselves with some of our remote workers and it works wonderfully, as they feel connected and also have visibility in the office.

Liz Kislik: Adding to this, hopefully they have their downtime as well. When we're in the office, there's visibility and there's invisibility; I feel less exposed in some ways, while on screen, on the other hand, I can actually feel more exposed. And so, it's very important to be explicit with those folks about rest, in order to avoid burnout.

**Will: Absolutely, there is no obligation for people to be online all the time. Let's talk a little about a very interesting point you have made regarding lizard listening. How can you train people to be better at raising their thoughts so that communication becomes more effective?**

Liz Kislik: So lizard listening is a term from my TEDx and it referred to us having a reptilian brain, a mammalian brain, and then the neocortex. Each has different levels of function, and the reptilian part is basically about our response to threat. When you are in lizard listening mode, all you're hearing is how things are going to affect you negatively. Will you lose something? Is something being taken away? Is someone challenging you? Are they trying to give you too much to do? You hear all the different ways that it could be uncomfortable for you or frightening. And once you are in that mode, you're not really listening. You're trying to deal with the threat. So that's fight, flight, freeze, fold, all the things that are about detaching and not really taking in the rest of the message.

Sometimes you can recognize when somebody goes into that mode. Have you ever been talking to somebody and it's almost like you can see them vacate the premises behind their eyes? Their face is there, but you know their spirit has gone somewhere else and you can almost see the hamster wheel in their brain running around. It's like you're not real to them anymore. It's their own cascade of thoughts.

There are two different aspects to this. One is not to trigger that, to think about how this person will receive what I am going to say. We all know an array of people, people who you can talk to in a very straightforward way and they're okay. You might even have a bad day and say it badly and they're okay, or they'll tell you, *"Next time, I'd like a little more care in how you deliver that, but okay. I get your point."* And then, there are people that you have to be more thoughtful and careful with, if you are a caring leader, but sometimes we make a mistake and then we have to repair it.

When someone comes to me and says, *"I explained that he was going to have to do this, and he got all upset and angry"*, I would ask what exactly they told him. We break it out and look at it and we see that a person could have heard, *"We always do it this way. You didn't do it this way. There must be something wrong with you. What's the matter with you?"* - I dramatize so that the person delivering the awkward message starts to see that it was straightforward in their head, but the counterpart might've really heard it differently. Then, I ask them what else they need to communicate. I take their thought and rebuild it to be more of a curious, open question, as opposed to a closed negative question.

The second thing is the idea of somebody pushing your buttons. We all have different buttons. When somebody is starting to react badly, you might see they are physically pulling away, or go away behind their eyes. You can say *"I see that something about that didn't sit well with you, you kind of pulled away."* Now is a great time, if you haven't done it before, to be teaching everybody techniques for grounding themselves, for re-anchoring their breath and sensory perceptions.

This is a wonderful, crazy technique you can use when you're dealing with somebody really stressed. Say, *"Turn around and look over your shoulder."* After they turn around, you say, *"Okay, now turn the other way."* Tell them, *"Really turn all the way around and look. Is anything chasing you?"* When we actually look behind us, it tells the brain that there's nothing bad behind us and, oddly, we start to calm down.

There are so many of these strange techniques that calm the brain. One of the best ones, incredibly fast, is to ask someone to lengthen their out breaths - that calms the Vagus nerve. I'm not going to go into the whole mechanism of why this works, but it's related to the parasympathetic nervous system. If you were running away from the tiger, in the jungle, you don't have time for a longer out-breath. Your brain knows you are in deep danger. If you have the time to lengthen your out-breath, you must actually be safe. So the whole system calms down.

Another technique is to ask, *"Tell me three things that you see, three things you can touch, three things you hear"*, etc.

When a situation gets out of hand or you feel people aren't getting your message, you can say, *"I need a break. I need to re-anchor. Let me reset. I'm going to do it. You want to do it with me? Here's what we're going to do."* And give them a breathing practice, let everybody work together on being calm.

**Will:** That makes all of sense.One of the things I learned is that, if I evaluate the way I talk to other people, I realize I don't want people to talk to me that way.

Many times when I'm coaching leaders, they say their boss is such a challenging person, and they explain why. Then I point out the fact that their behavior is similar. Basically, we don't like to be treated the way we treat other people. It's interesting how people are wired.

**Liz Kislik:** Do you know what else is funny? Ask them if they know what their bad face looks like. We all have one (in fact, multiple) that we use when we don't like what someone's

saying to us, or we don't trust them. It's very interesting for people to realize they have that when they didn't know it.

**Will:** I had the (not a great) pleasure to do a number of webinars in front of the mirror while traveling, and it was such a scary experience. It's true.

**Last but not least, do you have any advice that you'd like to share on how to not put a problem on the table?**

Liz Kislik: So how not to put a problem on the table? I'll give you a couple of quick pointers.

Try to avoid the words always and never. "You always make this mistake or you never do it the way I want it." These are good at home too. Always and never characterize the other person as being irredeemable. It's no different from actually shutting people down.

Another thing to avoid is to, in effect, say, *"Here's the problem. What are you going to do about it?"* As if it has nothing to do with me, I'm completely neutral in this situation. I'm shoving it across the table at you. A very legitimate answer to this is, *"I see that you just put a problem on the table and shoved it across the table to me. I'm going to put it back in the middle of the table and let's open it and unwrap it a little and see what's really going on and see if we can help each other."* Take it apart and remember that you need the other person's help. Even if they are the one in authority and they are responsible, or if you're the one in authority and you have the power to command them in some ways, you can't command someone to be helpful, they have to choose that.

Here is a bad way to put a problem on the table: *"This has been going on for a long time and it's time you knew about it."* Why haven't you brought it up in the past?

There are many bad ways, but let me give you a reverse situation. A number of years ago, it became almost fashionable for leaders to say, *"Don't bring me problems, bring me solutions."* That's a horror show. Sometimes they do have solutions and just need authority, and that's usually very easy to deal with. But when they bring you a problem, it's because they need you in some way, whether they don't know how to figure it out, or they don't know how to tell their colleagues what to do. And so, announcing that it is their responsibility to bring the solutions is a way of shutting them down and making them not tell you about problems you need to know about. If that has been your tendency, please start saying things like, "You've brought me the problem. Now tell me what your ideas are about it", open the conversation so that it becomes mutually advantageous to work on it.

If you're the boss, please don't do what I call "swooping and pooping". That means you leave the person on their own, and then decide something is terrible and you dive in and say, "This is not right." and leave. That can ruin a person's whole day to the point where they don't want to get any work done at all. Or they can't think of what to do. You never say anything positive. You just show up when it's bad and you leave them holding the mess. And so, this kind of "Let's see how we can work on this together" approach softens the communication and gives people back their brain power.

On my website, I have hundreds of blogs and articles about how you take situations apart.

**Will:** If people want to read up on this a little more specifically, they can also find your ebook on your website.

Thank you so much for our conversation. Very illustrated, very colorful, very clear on what to do and what not to do and how people can do specific things to help themselves and help their team.

I look forward to staying in touch on many other things down the road.

**Liz Kislik:** Thank you. Well, it was such a wide ranging conversation.

I really enjoyed it. Thanks very much.