Courageous Leadership from the Soul: How to Step Into the Leader You’re Meant to Be Transcript

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Introduction to Soulful Leadership

Hey friends, I'm your host Dr. Elizabeth Zermina, the intuitive psychiatrist. And today, today we are exploring how to lead not just with skill, not with strategy, but with soul.

We're going to talk to a guest who is phenomenal at helping others Really tap into courage, leading with courage. And we'll explore how to become that slow aligned leader that you are meant to be.

Our guest is an executive college leadership educator. He's been doing this for 20, more than 20 years, helping people align their work with their values.

She's the founder of Encourage Coaching and. has a wonderful celebrated TEDx talk, the attention we give, lessons from listening for a living. If you haven't seen it, you need to see it.

Katie, welcome to the show. Dr. Samantha, thank you so much for having me and for that lovely, lovely intro. You have me blushing over here. Yes, well, I mean, you're helping take people to the next level.

And we'd love to hear a little more about you, your background, what led you down this path of really helping people really step into their power and become the leaders that they really want to be.

Katie's Career Journey and Turning Points

Yeah, my journey is very much a nomadic one in terms of my career and professional path, but I'll say now that I've been working professionally for the better part of 20 years, As I step back, I can very clearly see a thread of altruism that pulls all the way through my incredibly varied experiences.

And so I, when I went to college, always knew I wanted to make a difference in the world and have a positive impact on others and the communities that I was connected to and I thought politics was going to be my outlet to do that.

And so majored in political science at Miami University of Ohio, graduated in an election year. no better dream or alignment for a political science major than having an opportunity to work on a presidential campaign right out of school.

And so moved out to Minneapolis, Minnesota and had the opportunity work out one of the coordinated campaigns for John Kerry. I always tell people until I became a small business owner, that was the hardest I ever worked in my career to at the end of it, not have a job, any prospects or any health insurance because the Affordable Peer Act did not exist yet.

And so needed something that was a bit more secure and stable transitioned into the nonprofit sector. I spent a significant amount of time working for nonprofits in New York City and Chicago.

When I was in new York, I did fundraising and development work for the Innocence Project where our mission was to exonerate folks who had been wrongfully convicted using DNA evidence that wasn't available at the time of their conviction.

So very clearly the work that I doing on a day-to-day basis was transforming lives, right? But there was a disconnect between who I working with every day and the type of work that I was doing, but I couldn't articulate why it felt unsatisfying to me.

And on top of that, it is hard to live in New York City on any salary, much less a nonprofit salary. So after a few years, moved back to Chicago, which is where my home is, and my family is.

Spent a couple years working for the AIDS Foundation of Chicago also in fundraising and development. and was feeling a similar frustration, almost bordering on resentment for the personal sacrifices I was making to be able to in this profession and doing this work.

And I saw a lot of my friends having a lots of success, and I put that in quotes because I didn't know what success meant to me at the time, but a a of financial success in commercial real estate.

I thought, my goodness, if they can do this, I can too. And wouldn't you know that if I had met with a career coach or a Career Counselor, they might have said, Katie, there's a values discrepancy here that you might want to investigate before you make this move.

And I didn't do it. Dr. Samantha, I knew on my very first day I made a major career misstep and actually went back to my old office because it was right down the street to have lunch with my coworkers on the first date of my new job.

because I felt so out of my element and ended up sticking it out for almost four years. Midwest mentality of you definitely don't quit one job until you have another one lined up.

It was a time period where the market was not just as for different reasons, but the labor market, was really competitive during that time as well. I know given your education, training, you can very much understand how the disconnect between being able to show up as who you are with your values and strengths and skills and use those on a day-to-day basis and have them rewarded versus not.

can really take a toll on our mental health and well-being. And in 2012, I ended up taking a medical leave of absence from work for my mental heath, which at the time was pretty avant-garde.

HR was even a little bit confused. They were like, but you're physically fine. I'm like I am, But I wake up crying every day and this is not normal. we weren't talking about mental health the way we are post-COVID.

And if we were, it was to stigmatize. Right. You're absolutely right. So it's only to stigma-ize it. We definitely weren' t talking abut an employer's responsibility to their employees for their mental heath and well-being.

During this time away, I did an inpatient and outpatient treatment program and some good therapy healing work and realized Oh my gosh, this crisis of identity between the personal and the professional isn't unique to Katie O'Malley.

There are a lot of folks who struggle with this. And so it was during that medical leave that I decided to go back to school at 30, earn my master's degree in counseling so I could help people at the intersection of mental health and work.

I know what I'm about to say is not going to surprise you in the least, but learned pretty early on in my graduate studies Insurance companies aren't super keen to cover therapy sessions about work because work is not a mental health diagnosis.

And so I finished the degree, but instead of getting licensed as a counselor, got credentialed as coach, spent the next 10 years working in higher education at the University of Texas at Austin and University Of Chicago Booth School of Business with students in their career and leadership development.

Obviously very much fulfilling that driver and motivation of altruism I have. But there was still this missing piece around accessibility and justice and knowing that it's a very small segment of the population that gets to access educational institutions like these much less all the bells and whistles that come along with it.

That's when I decided to open, I guess, for lack of a better word, encourage coaching. Had no business plan, no ideal client, just very much let's put up a website on Wix, have Rocket Lawyers set me up as an LLC, and if I build it, will anyone come?

And it turns out there was a need for exceptional career and leadership development services that were also culturally humble and financially accessible.

And so had some nice steady organic growth from 2018 to 2022, which was also the year I turned 40 and said, if I'm not going to bet on myself now, what am I going do it?

And that was the I left my full time job at the University of Chicago to focus on the coaching practice full-time, saying to myself, You know what, if it doesn't work out after a year, you can go back to working for someone else.

But wouldn't you know, what you could do for a small business when you dedicate 40 to 50 hours a week to it.

Defining Courage in Leadership

And that is how I get to be here with you today. Almost four years since I made that move into full-time work. It takes guts to go out and live your dream.

I'm in awe of what have you been able to accomplish. And I love the focus on courage. Can you tell us a little bit about leading with courage, what that means, and what it looks like for you.

I mean, for me, but I think also my approach more generally is first really identifying what you stand for. So what are your core values, your non-negotiables, because once you're able to establish those decision-making and moving through the world with authenticity becomes really simple.

Not easy, because a lot of times we have to make courageous choices and it's really simply, but it is not easy to do. And so for me, my three core values that help me navigate the word writ large, which right now feels upside down and bonkers, is courage, learning, and justice.

And so whenever I'm faced with a choice, how I am going to communicate with someone, or how am I going show up or potentially not show, say yes or say no to a particular thing, it needs to align with those three values.

And so for me, courage is very much showing up in a way that is reflective of who you are and not necessarily caring about how people will judge how you're showing and starting to recognize, especially now as I'm in my 40s, how energizing that is for people and what a lighthouse it can be for others who have spent their, sometimes the entirety of their lives or at least their work lives, contorting themselves into a pretzel.

to be someone they're not, to do work they don't like around people that are disagreeable to them and are not like-minded. And so for me, it's really scary to truly put yourself out there as who you are, but doing it with consistency in moments that matter for, me is one of the best definitions for courage that there are.

Well, that's awesome. That's Awesome. You've worked with a lot of different people. I wonder what are the biggest things that you feel hold leaders back from really leading authentically?

And my answer is the same across the board for almost any client I have ever worked with, which is an openness to deepening your self-awareness. And everyone comes to coaching at a different starting line for their self awareness, but it is impossible to effectively lead others until we can lead ourselves.

Why Self-Awareness Holds Leaders Back

And so sometimes it's people have not had the opportunity to engage in counseling therapy or with any kind of helping professional. I hear so often folks are like, I'm asking for feedback all the time and I either get things that are unhelpful or kind like duh, yes, already know this about myself.

And so really exploring how you're experienced by others and being willing to say, you know what, this is not my intention, but clearly this the impact that I'm having.

And being to take accountability for that and decide, is it worth the effort and energy for me to make the behavioral changes I need to be as effective as possible or to, as Simon Sinek says, care for those in my charge?

And so, self-awareness tends to be the foundational barrier and people will want to talk about delegation, perfectionism, communication. Yes, all of those things, but we can't start making modifications to those behaviors until we understand our starting line for who we are and how we move through the world.

Absolutely. 100% agreeable. There's so much truth in that statement. You will, as a leader, you're going to make or break your experience based on your ability to really reflect on yourself.

Yes. And so I wonder as you've worked with people, what are some of the things, the surprises that your clients have found as they've explored leaning in to courage?

Yeah. I work with, you know, everyone has a different risk tolerance, right? And oftentimes when we think about courage, I think we've been socialized to think of courage as never being afraid.

And so That's not the case. Courage is about being afraid, allowing yourself to acknowledge that fear and take action anyway. And so when I work with clients that are more risk averse, they're like, oh, courage, that's, not for me.

I'm always doing risk assessments. So I don't need to be courageous because I make all of the best choices I can with data and analysis. When in actuality, sometimes the moment may be calling for you to make a choice without data and without analysis because there is not time for it and what are you going to do in that moment?

Building Courage Through Small Risks

So the moments that challenge us to push against our comfort zone and become uncomfortable That is courage. And it doesn't have to be in these huge macro moments.

It can be really tiny micro moments and so I can remember working with a client and we were going over some of his assessment results and it suggested that people didn't experience him as an ideator or someone who generated a lot of new ideas or innovation and he stopped me And he said, Katie, all I do all day long is think about new ideas and new innovations and ways for things to be better.

This is not true. It is NOT true of me. And I said okay, let's pause and think that for a second. You just shared with me you think these things all-day.

when was the last time you communicated one of your ideas in a meeting or had an idea, wrote it down in an email and shot it off to your team or your boss or to the client.

And he just stared at me nodded his head kind of like you are now and he's like, I get it. I wasn't expressing myself in way that communicated to others.

These are my ideas, right? And that's what had been holding him back. in his career. And then he said, and I know I don't do it because I'm scared. I am scared what if people don t like the idea or they judge me for the ideas.

So this is where you can step into courage. The next time it's just a small thing. Put it out there. Sit with the discomfort and see what happens. We don' t want to push ourselves to a place of intolerable discomfort because we will never want to take that risk or action again or step into courage.

But it's building that muscle in micro moments over time. Oh, I love it. Building it over time. Slow and steady. Very good. Forward is a pace. That is my motto.

I Love it forward is the yes. Yes.

The AIR Framework for Listening

Oh It's it's wonderful and and you've You've, as you've gone through your path, like you had these interesting frameworks that you used and one that your known for is the AIR framework.

And I wonder if you could explain what it is, how it came about and how they might use something. Yeah. Yeah, so I like to think about my master's degree in counseling really as a master degree and listening.

It was spending three years rewiring our brains to think about how we communicate and how important listening is in that equation. And as I was moving through the program and learning in my coursework how to more effectively listen, started to see how poorly society does at this particular practice, even though I can remember all the way back in kindergarten just being told all of the time, kids, pay attention, everyone needs to pay, but while we were taught to read, write, do arithmetic and all kinds of advanced geometry and calculus, We never had a course on listening.

We were just told to listen. And I was like, we got to be able to do better than this. I knew I needed to to something with it when I started experiencing strong frustration, bordering on anger when people were not listening, And I had to remind myself, I have a different knowledge set and skill set than they do, but we shouldn't be kind of boxing this off or gating this often the helping professions.

It's something that can help. us at home, in the workplace, In our communities, and particularly right now with what we see happening with the political dialogue in our country, a way to find ourselves reconnecting with each other and an idea of civility, where just because I'm letting someone else share their perspective with me doesn't mean I have to change mine, but it doesn' mean that I need to shut theirs down either.

The AIR framework is, again, I always say this, simple, not easy, right? AIRR is a simple formula to help folks listen, to understand, connect, and build trust.

The A stands for attention, the I for intention and the R for recognition and it works in two directions. So we want to apply air when we're in conversation with somebody else.

How are we attending to that person through physical through physical nonverbal cues, because doing it does two things. It suggests to the other person, we are listening and offering them our time and respect, but it also takes our body to attention.

So instead of our minds starting to wander in a million different directions, Instead, we're focused on, am I making eye contact? Am I leaning in? am i demonstrating warmth and openness to this person as they are speaking?

But we also need to apply that same attention to ourselves. What is happening in my body? What reactions and responses are bubbling up that might take me out of this conversation as well?

So a little bit of somatic inquiry, which I think is a whole nother podcast topic, but The same applies for INR, so the intention. Am I listening to understand?

Which the eye of the air formula is simple. It's going to be the same every single time. it is the constant in the formula. I am here to understands. Not judge, not respond, um, Not become volatile, simply to understanding.

Um, when we do that for another person, the reciprocity for them to do it for us, It's 99% of the time. We're making that investment in them. They're willing to do it for us.

But we also have to recognize when our intention does shift to judgment. So when it does to wanting to respond with our own idea or perspective and starting to get a sense of what are the tipping points for when that happens.

we can be prepared and do a little bit better in staying in that intention to understand and finally recognition. Recognition for me is about dignity and it's something that I think has gotten lost in the age of social media and our attention economy.

There's very little dignity on these social-media platforms. there's no dignity in being with someone and their phone vibrating or dinging and there attention being taken away to a device when you are actually there with them in person.

And so recognition is all about the understanding that another person's lived experience is typically where their idea or perspective is rooted. And it's not your job to judge that.

It's your to try again with that intention to understand it. Similarly, asking yourself, what are the judgments and assumptions that are getting in the way of my ability to how can I recognize the barriers to me connecting with this person are also likely rooted in my own lived experience.

And so the example that I like to give is I spent my entire life living in the Midwest and the Northern Midwest at that, right? So Chicago, then St. Louis, went to college in Ohio.

First job was in Minnesota. Then moved out to New York City before coming back to Chicago. And when I got the opportunity at the University of Texas at Austin, I had some people say to me, it's going to be a culture shift down there for you.

And I'm like, well, I can manage that. It's also Austin. It's this lovely blue spot in the middle of a red state, not realizing all of the different judgments and assumptions that I was bringing with me about Texans and about the South.

And so I got down there, Dr. Samantha, and within the first month, I found myself tuning out in meetings, campus orientation sessions. And when I finally caught myself doing this, There's no way I've learned everything that I need to know about this institution, how it operates, its students.

I'm also a newer professional in this particular field of student development and higher education. And as I reflected, I realized I had grown up being socialized with friends, family, and media, that folks who spoke with a Southern accent were not as intelligent as me.

And it was really hard to, one, come to that awareness, to acknowledge it, and then do something about it. Right? And so it's vulnerable even to talk about.

Now, I used to use this example with my students at Chicago Booth all the time. And then I would say, y'all, anyone else have an experience like this?

Or is it just me? Are you going to leave me hanging? And what ended up happening is those students would then start raising their hands and being like, yeah, I have judgments and assumptions too.

And let me talk through an example of mine. We all have them and it doesn't make us bad. It makes us human. the challenges when we're unwilling to your point to reflect on what is getting in the way of me connecting with another human.

You have so many gold nuggets that are just really important to take home. I think listening, really going in with a specific intention, the intention to understand like how it transforms the relationship, a conversation, it is priceless.

It's priceless.

Practicing Self-Awareness for Alignment

And so I guess what I'd like to know, a lot of our listeners are really interested, they're really concerned about being

aligned, living an aligned life, having careers that are soul aligned.

You talked about self-awareness I wonder if you can be a little more specific about specific practices, tools that they could use to be more self-aware.

Yeah, yeah. And so when I think about self-awareness, I really think of it through the lens of the five-factor model of personality, right? So it's five dimensions that has been well-researched back from the 1950s, consistently updated.

Thinking about the dimensions of who we are as humans in terms of our adjustment, our extraversion, or openness to experiences, are agreeableness, and our dependability.

And so I would encourage folks, write those five down and think about it. How open am I to experiences? What are the things that tend to get me curious?

Why do people depend on me for and what do they tend not depend me on for? Um, what are things make me feel at peace and make my nervous system feel rest?

And what are the things that kind of kick it out of whack? When I'm in a space, how much of that space am I taking up either in the ways that I assert myself or the way that socialize?

And then when I communicate, do I tend to be more direct and candid or do tend be a little more harmony? seeking and regardless of your answers, there's no right or wrong answers.

Good or bad responses. What you need to then remember is there are going to 50% of the population is showing up differently than that and sometimes significantly different than.

And it's not about, um, you becoming more like them or them becoming like you, but how you can take your self-awareness and understanding to be more effective in a situation where someone might not have that same level of awareness as you do.

And so, again, starting with reflection, I think those five dimensions are a really good place to start. Then going to your friends, family, partner, being like, this is how I show up.

and how I think people experience me, what do you got for me? Is this accurate or is my intention different than the impact that I'm having? So kind of that initial two-step approach and then deciding Is this how I want people to experience me?

And if it is, getting really clear on what those behaviors are and turning up the volume on those. I think it's not, I know it Stolle Parton who says, figure out who you are, and do it on purpose.

And it it not how you want to people experience you, figuring out what are the behaviors that most align with how want. People to see you as you move through the world.

Awesome, awesome. And then the last, last question. Looking ahead, you know, what's your vision for leadership? What would you like to see in the next decade?

Uh-huh. What I would love to is a recognition between all generations about the strengths and talents and knowledge that they're bringing to the table.

Right now, we have five generations for the first time in our history, all in the same labor market and workforce. And oh my goodness, if everyone doesn't have something to say about that generation above them, below them next to them.

The truth is we can all be learning from each other. And we're all bringing different ideas and talents and lived experiences to the table that can actually make work better for everybody.

And so I would love to see, because we are also going to be working longer and probably retiring later because our lives are longer. How are we making space for all of these different perspectives that are coming in to exist?

and not capping somebody's potential or ignoring their idea because of their age and what generation they fall in.

The Future of Multigenerational Leadership

Love it, love it. For our listeners that would love and I'm sure many of them would very much love to get in contact with you, where can they find you?

For sure. So you can visit my website, that kind of professional home that can take you to all of the services that Encourage Coaching has to offer. It's www.encouragecoaching.org.

You can also follow me on LinkedIn, post a lot of great labor market, leadership, career research and advice there. It's just backslash Kate O'Malley and then Instagram.

If you ever feel like you need to rage quit your job after a particular meeting or email, follow me on Instagram at Encourage Coach Chicago. I post lots of cute photos and videos of my chief cuteness officer, Foxy, who is a mini golden doodle along with good workplace office.

It's funny because it's true. So that's where you can find me. Awesome. Well, Katie, thank you so much for sharing your wisdom and your heart. You have shown us that leadership isn't just about strategy.

Just a beautiful presence, but courage, soul connection, all those things really important. And, and I know that this conversation will resonate with many.

Thank you so much. If you haven't heard it yet today. I appreciate you. The soul in me honors the soul and you." If you'd like to see more episodes like this, please subscribe or click here.

And friends, if this spoke to you, leave a comment below. We would love to hear from you!