

## Transcription - Nick Jonsson Part 3

Welcome back. I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec. Today, we're concluding our discussion with Nick Jonsson from Singapore and in this session we're going to go in a little bit more depth about the journey that Nick took and what the first steps were and how he is now applying that and sharing it with others that are currently in the position that he was in when he first had to take stock of his life.

Speaking on this topic in the beginning was quite challenging, particularly sharing my own story. You know when I went to the publisher and I wanted to write about this topic, I wanted to include the survey findings and wanted to include interviews with other executives. I did not plan to include my story in the book and it was only that the publisher, an Australian publisher, who told me, we need your story in there, we needed some personality and I was so shy to write this down. They interviewed me for a few weeks in detail to get my story in there and then when I had it down there I shared it with my wife and I said, is this really the truth and she pushed me to go even deeper and open up more, to share our darkest secrets when we've gone through the most difficult days of our lives. As humans, we're not so used to share that. Now it's in a book on Amazon, you know, I hid it but now it's there forever, right.

Given that you did that really open sharing, do you now find when people have read that story that they think they know you, but they ask questions when they already know the answer? Yes, some people were shocked in the beginning and some people are surprised by the level of honesty that I'm sharing. The authenticity is something that people are talking about, authentic leadership, but here it's really that perhaps the next level. But some people, even when they start to read the book, they said after thirty-seven pages I had to stop, I had to wait for a moment because I'm just so shocked. And then they continue, specially here in Asia, as I said there was not many books written talking about this before.

Just on that, can I ask you the less than pleasant question, have you lost contacts over it? No I haven't. I'm now a small business owner myself but I should say if I had been in a big multinational company with a lot of approval to get from head of communication and the HR and so on, the book might never have been published because they might have said, well, this is not going to reflect on our company well and so on. Because I had this small company, I could actually get the word out there, which I'm grateful for. And I knew that I took a risk, but I thought that the rewards will be better. And again, it was not

about not thinking about myself, but the greater good here in that we spread the message that we feel more comfortable talking about this topic.

In some of our earlier podcasts, we talked about joining peer networks and finding a group, particularly for senior executives, to find a group where you can talk to one another without judgment. And I think that is a very difficult area for these people to explore. How do you go about finding where those groups are?

Yes, Kim and that's what I do for a living now. It's such a match for me to work in such an organization. There are many organisations of course, all around the world. In Australia I gave my talk to a group called Mentoring Men, where they have I think a weekly gathering online, they also meet in person as well and they are sharing stories and so on. In Australia and New Zealand you can look them up and many of them are confidential, like ours is confidential. So we create a group of 20 to 25 senior executives, they sign a non-disclosure agreement, we make sure there's no competitor in the group, it has a moderator at least for the group and you come there to discuss your work related challenges, to get some support with them.

So, if you have a conflict with your team, have a conflict with your boss, you're feeling stressed or pressured, this should be your natural place to discuss it. So what is happening then of course, is that you are addressing the issues before they become isolation and before they come loneliness and you're not sitting on this alone. So, this is a wonderful way. So I can encourage every senior executive listening, if you don't belong to a network, that is a great way of course for you to get the support.

I think it's really good how you applied what executives use all the time in running a business - they use tools, they use coaches. What you demonstrated yet again, in a very, very powerful way, is how you used the coach to help you on your journey, how you are using the tools and creating tools like those groups that you can join confidentially. I think that makes it so much easier. It takes away the loneliness, but it keeps the practical approach as well to people. So I think the more people use what you put in place and the strategies that you use, they would be more happier and more fulfilled as well, not just stressed.

Yes. The peer network is one thing and what I also do now, as I mentioned, when something is a specific assignment that I was challenged with like the public speaking, then I did consult a coach for that. I think that's another thing. You know, the peer network can be an ongoing thing where you build stronger

relationships and you have people to help you but I would encourage everyone, also if you are senior executive and you feel like you're having a very difficult assignment where you need help, don't be shy to reach out to coaches there. So many coaches in every area as well. So that is what I do now, if I really feel this stressful, are we going for a change in the company now? See who can help me with this, who would be a coach or mentor, who would be a person I met many times? This person can be a mentor perhaps over a coffee. You might not need a formal agreement over it.

One of the earlier questions that I sent was, does isolation happen as a career progresses upwards or is it something that might always be there in your character? Now we've heard your story this morning and you were honest about being rebellious, in going your own way from a young age. In terms of someone starting out in their career and they have these goals that they have set themselves, how do they identify that they are pushing themselves into the lonely progress rather than a measured progress?

Well I would say it's more isolation at the top, lonely at the top but it can start at any level and it seems like the higher achiever you are, even at the lower level, then you will also naturally be isolated. Perhaps, you're spending more focus on working harder rather than spending time at the water cooler, when everyone goes out for lunch break, you decide to have a salad on your desk because you want to work harder and you probably want to impress the bosses. You are going to do a great job, you going to get the recognition and then everyone else will start to resent you, be a bit jealous and they would talk behind your back. This leads to you sitting in the office having more salad by yourself, impressing the bosses more and that is the challenge right there. That is what happened, Kim, to me. If I may, I will share the story of one woman I interviewed for my book which was exactly this scenario. I think that both Fulyana and I have seen that in our careers. We can look back on that and say why didn't we, as the manager, identify that rather than be selfish, as you have pointed out, and say this is good because it will make me (the manager) look good. Our responsibility, as leaders, is to identify that there are certain behaviours that are dangerous long-term and do something about it, recognize it.

Exactly. I spoke with one woman, she was a managing director for a big international bank, working in a man's industry where many times she was the only woman at the board meetings and so on, and she had in the last few years of her career started to feel very isolated. She was most exactly like that example, having lunch by herself at the desk when the rest of her team was walking out the door, they didn't talk to her much. Also, because she felt lonely

and isolated at work, she started to push her husband away at home and even dared him to leave her. On the outside everything looked great - she had a perfect job, a car and private school for the kids and everything else. So everyone thought that everything was great, then she had an accident, had a surgery on her face and she got a scar which made her lose her confidence a lot during this time and that pushed her into more isolation. And when I interviewed her for the book, it went as far as she admitted to me that she even had rehearsed her own suicide twice. This might have been a savior for her because I was the first person she shared this with and the outcome of that was she spoke to a therapist and her husband and the three had a conversation. And she turned this around. And bravely enough, she even shared it in her team, even with her boss inside the company, as a learning for all of them. This was during the pandemic and her whole company culture then transformed as a result of this with everyone daring to open up much more. So I can indeed see that women can isolate to this stage as well.

That's a wonderful piece of information to share because I think that we both were people who started early in the day and thought that we were doing the right thing, justified it to ourselves I will say. We need to be recognizing that what we are telling ourselves is justification not the real reason. We have to dig a bit deeper and address the real reason as we do with anything that becomes an issue. Don't treat the symptoms, treat the disease.

I agree and to add to that, our responsibility of setting that by being that role model, by us doing it. I certainly went through that, us doing what you just described, that not good for us, but it's setting the wrong leadership example to others in that, this is the only way to lead, that horrible lonely working 24 hours scenario, which is not sustainable.

Absolutely, I've seen so many times when I'm working with executives. It is, indeed, the long working hours and not being able to set parameters for yourself. Many people are working across two, three time zones, 16 hour working days and it doesn't matter who you are, you going to break down eventually.

Let's move forward into what you are doing now. So Nick tell us a bit about the opportunities for you now. Yes, indeed, I'm running a confidential peer network now in Singapore, Indonesia, and we just setting up in Malaysia as well. In Singapore this has grown to a mature business here just like in Australia and New Zealand, in US and Europe, it's been around for some time as well. Here it's a mature market, we have 700 senior executives and business owners I should say. During the epidemic we realized that it was a lot of business owners

who also felt isolated. So we now have 100 entrepreneurs in three different groups here. It's really to provide them with a safe space when they feel that they can discuss the work related challenges and so on. So my role now is, I have appointed teams to run the meetings, so mine is more to strategy and growing this business and I'm very excited about taking this into Indonesia this year and also Malaysia.

Just to paint the picture that when we came into Indonesia and we had a press conference, we had to spend 1 hour to explain what a confidential peer group was to the press because the words don't even exist in their language. We are the first peer network to enter the market so it's so fresh for them. Even the concept, why would I share my challenge with someone.

Obviously the early enthusiasm is there so how do you get the contacts? How do you get into that area that you need to? Well to enter these new markets is by referrals. So it will be someone who is a member of an existing network in Singapore who recommend to his/her general manager in Indonesia you should join this and become a member. So we really have to take baby steps, you know, to get them in and practice to be vulnerable. You cannot push them right away to go very deep. Just be in the safe place and start. Everyone is very suspicious in the beginning before they open up. But then we need to prepare behind the scene with one or two members who we know a little bit, prep them and get them to open up and then everyone else, when seeing this person is there to share their challenge, now everyone is helping them or look at them they solved it. So this is that the way that a country and executives in companies can develop and then grow.

Since they're developing trust at that very basic and personal level, do you see that they also benefit in a business sense? Yes. Certainly I've seen that, I seen transformations, I seen in senior executives, also in Singapore, people who got so much confidence by doing these exercises in the peer group that they changed the rules externally. I saw people who suddenly dared to perhaps smile on a photo and making a LinkedIn post and sharing something a bit personal, something they've never done before because we have just lived in this bubble and as I called it in my book, I call it smiling depression. You know that when we don't dare to share what are also some of the challenges we are facing.

Are you planning to open up here in Australia? We actually have a partner over there who's running a very small network, but I'm hoping to one day also come and be part of that, to make it bigger. So if we hear from any local people that could benefit from that we've got your details that we can put on our website.

Nick is there anything we haven't covered today that you would like to highlight? I think you have covered most of it and I think a few of the key things that I would like to highlight is indeed, if there's something on your mind, stop and write it down, or take a bit of inventory, and that's what I did it. You know, once I started to speak out, I took some time for myself to write down what was the issue. I was overweight, that I was drinking too much alcohol, I need to get it back into exercise, I had some broken relationships, I needed to make amends and say sorry to the people I hurt and I wrote basically this whole inventory and then I just started to tick these off. That worked for me and I've seen it work for a lot of people especially if you are a senior executive. We're used to work with a check list and to-do list. So, this is a good chance. I mean, just like someone running a shop or a doing a stock take once a year, how often do we do an honest stocktake on ourselves?

Fabulous. Just one last question Nick, in terms of the family that you rebelled against in those early years, you briefly said that perhaps they might have understood what you were going through, has the last couple of years where you become so much more the spokesperson for these issues, has that changed the relationship you have with them? Yes, Kim, part of the list I wrote was all the relationships where I need to make amends and say sorry, which I needed to repair and of course, the family was on page 1 of this list. I had to go back and make amends and that included people including my sister and I could remember an incident when my I was in Sweden visiting my family, my son was there, my ex-wife was there and he was about 3 or 4 years old and when I didn't watch my sister had given him Coca-Cola. At the time, according to me, he was not allowed to drink a soda. So he drank it and I basically took my son and left the table. I stormed off, I didn't have the tools then, I didn't have the patience to have proper communication. My way was just to storm off. We had a broken relationship for a few years after that when I didn't want to talk to her, I avoided anything about this. I had to go back then when I was in my recovery to make amends to her and make things right. And we now have a beautiful relationship again. That's been repaired, I explained that I was not well at the time. And so on such small incidents, it can really make scars. But I repaired all of them. Now I was home this summer in Sweden. I spent seven weeks working from there and staying at my parents place and yeah, all those relationships are repaired but they were quite tense before.

They're huge steps, they're huge changes that you have to make to the way you think and the way you justify the way you've been living. I encourage anyone who is listening to take the first step. It is really important that it doesn't have to be a

big step. Baby steps are what works best because that's how we learn to do anything, with baby steps. So, please listen to what we've talked about, read the book, reach out and talk to someone, write it down and all of the things that we talked about today, just pick one of them, start with that and move on to the next thing.

Nick we thank you for your time this morning. It has been a real joy to hear you and to see you. There you have three parts to a discussion with Nick Jonsson from Singapore. The link to his website and his book are below the recording here on the website. For now I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec.