

Transcription - Maura Sweeney Part 1

Welcome back, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec. Today we are joined by one of our international guests, Maura Sweeney, but first I want to apologize because Fulyana is not actually with us today. She got called away at the last minute, so Maura and I will have a discussion and I'm sure that at some point Fulyana will add her feelings about the discussion to the recording that you all hear. So welcome, Maura, and let me just tell you a little bit about Maura before we let her talk. I tried to do a little bit of research and came across the fact that there is just a mass of videos on YouTube and information about

Maura. So the one that resonated with me most, it came from 2017 when Maura was talking about being the change. Now you know that Fulyana and I have talked quite often about being the change in an organisation, being a leader. So Maura is going to talk to us about leadership, leadership soft skills. Difficult for me to say. Maura is an author and speaker and has had some corporate time in leadership, but a lifetime of natural mentoring. So welcome, Maura.

Oh Kim, thank you very much for having me. I'm delighted to be with you and I didn't even realise that part of your international cadre of guest speakers, so I appreciate that as well.

Lovely. Maura, leadership, soft skills. What are we talking about?

Well let me open up by saying how passionate I am about the soft skills. Thank you for doing the research you did on me and just for the sake of your audience, it might be helpful for them to know that I had a decade, at two major corporations here in the United States where I was in management, one for a national company, one for an international company, and then for another decade, my husband and I had our own small business in sales, but in any case these days in my newest iteration of life, I took the very essence and passion I've always had about helping others develop their soft skills because I know in terms of making an organization work, we need those things, and they're often overlooked in places like school or even in your traditional settings.

So to answer your question, how I describe soft skills, let me say what it's not. I'm told people learn to be, let's say they may be an engineer, so they go to school and they learn certain principles, they might be a techie and they learn coding, but how exactly do you learn soft skills when you're not always offered in traditional classroom settings? I would say the soft skills are everything that has to do with people. People skills, for example, how do I get people on board with a mission that I'm looking to accomplish? How do I get a team of people to work together? How do I get people to see things through the same lens so that everyone's working toward the same end? And for people who are looking to be in a leadership, those soft skills are, I want to say it's almost like the butter that makes things work and and congeal well rather than working like something needs, do you have WD40 where you live? (Yes, we do.) It's the, it's the thing that gets rid of the squeak and helps all of the gears work smoothly. And so that's how I would define soft skills, the people part.

And do you find that organisations will identify that as part of their selection process or are

they just expecting that people will have it when they get into a leadership level of an organisation?

You know, I've seen both. I've seen what I would call transactional leaders. They're put into a position maybe because they've got good results somewhere else. Maybe they are very good at delivering numbers, but that doesn't always mean that that same individual will do well in interactions with staff, with a group, especially even maybe it's a group that's reporting directly to you, but how about when it's extended groups of people, your client base, some of the outside consultants you're working with. And I would say it really takes one to know one when it comes to soft skills. And some people are highly attuned and they recognise the value to working and working well and effectively with people where other people are still living by more about traditional model, which is get the job done because I'm your boss.

Yes, yes indeed. And so just on that, if we extend it beyond the organisation or structure in terms of staff and employees and resources, if we look at the board or boards of management, is it as important for these people to have soft skills?

You know, that's another excellent question. You know occasionally I will speak at corporations. A lot of my speaking is at the university level, but I will say that it's at corporations. Oftentimes, there will be mission statements and they're printed. They sound great, but here's what I have noticed from my own experience, either directly going in and speaking or being with a lot of individuals that will come to me for some guidance, is that there's a disconnect oftentimes between the valuable, let's say, soft skills or traits they want to bring into an organisation or promote within an organisation and the actual execution of it and I want to attribute it to one word. Well, one of it could be ignorance, but I have a feeling and a sense that the other big reason why soft skills are maybe spoken about but not integrated within an organisation is because of fear. It takes a lot of courage to be a soft skill manager because it's easy to beat people over the head, but it's not always easy to get people to come around especially when there's conflict or a difference of opinion and people's egos and fears, "Ah, maybe I'm not going to get this right, maybe I can't convince someone something or maybe someone will see my lack of knowledge or my ignorance." And that's the disconnect, I think, that oftentimes gets in the way between standard traditional ways to call it 'x-level management' and the 'y-level manager' who really knows how to massage a group of people and bring out the best in them.

So you mentioned courage there and I noticed in the information that we had before we actually talked to you was that the areas that you identified were integrity, transparency and advocacy, would you add courage to that as well?

I would, I think. Another way too, I would say Kim, that in order to be a leader of integrity, a manager of integrity, you do need courage. Yeah, you could string them out or you could just say in order to be a person of integrity, there's a lot of times when the rubber hits the road because it's very easy to get platitudes, to tell people during a meeting or when you bring them on board or you're promoting them and bringing them in, that you have a certain belief system and a certain, let's say, code of ethics, but it's quite another thing when challenges arise, when there's risk involved, when

there's potential loss. In order to maintain that integrity, you have to remain true to your work, and true to your values. And a lot of times I can speak this out of my own experience, it takes a lot of courage because you know sometimes in developing people we could go down with them while teaching them to kind of raise their own standards and it could be a little risky and a little bit dicey, but sure you could easily encourage integrity.

Well just as you were talking, I can actually look at the others, the transparency and the advocacy and think, well you need courage in those as well. So really it's going to be the baseline for all of those areas.

Very true because I would say they're all very integrated. You know if you get one, hopefully you're going to get the others. If you are a person of integrity, then there is a certain level about you where people could come to you, they could get honest answers from you. They'll also get honesty from you when the time is right. And then even the advocacy too because somewhere in there people need to understand that you are always going to be promoting the good things that you claim to be about.

That leads us on to the first of the questions that we gave you beforehand to think about, which is the area that you find is most critical in terms of leadership soft skills is integrity, transparency or advocacy? And you can't say that they're all equally important. You have to choose one.

For goodness' sake, all right! You know, I'm going to go with integrity because and this is why I'll have to answer if you didn't make it easy for me there. I think about this in my own background. I'm again so passionate about speaking about quality leadership. And what do I remember thinking? You know, I looked back on my corporate years and I thought, wow, I didn't manage like others did. Not always managing managers as well as salespeople, support people, etc. And I thought the reason why people would get behind me, trust in me, follow me, was because I did have that integrity. But the integrity is the thing that says, you know what? I've seen this person operate before. I've seen them in good times and in bad times. I've seen them in stressful times. I've seen them when they could take shortcuts or when they could do something that might not have been a long-term best decision. And it's that overall exercise of integrity, that people who watch you in a working environment, can see over the course of time, that will ultimately, I think, the biggest piece because people will follow someone they can trust. And also I would want to add one more thing to it, is that let's say you're a person of integrity, generally a person of integrity has enough value for themselves and for others.

So there's another component to it. Let's say you've got a leader, you're following the person of integrity, but maybe you're going to question something that they're doing. You want to understand something that you're a little bit concerned about. A person of integrity, if they're big and usually they would be, they would be open to the questioning, the explanation and the trust factor so that you wouldn't get shut down for having asked that person, maybe an unpopular question, or as I said, a challenging one that really is saying, do you believe what you're saying and can we trust you to follow you?

Yes. So it's really encouraging a safe environment for the work group to feel that they can

voice anything that is of concern to them or any ideas they've got that they think might work better in a working environment.

I have found that to be the case. Yeah. That's a good word to say, safe, because I know there's a lot of people, I mean, I was speaking with several this week, they may be in environments where they're working, this is in their words, for people that are either egotists or people who are insecure and they play mind games. So it adds so much stress to employees, they end up worrying about things they don't need to, they're in confusion because the signals are all crossed. So to be a leader that does create that kind of safe environment, it smooths out so many wrinkles and it really empowers employees, it does.

It does. And so you get a synergy within the work group where the sum total is far more than the individual components and that's really the ultimate in terms of working in the team environment, I would think.

So right, so right. And again, there are many people, it could be that their consciousness is not there or that just that they're very work oriented, task oriented people, but this is what I have found repeatedly. Now it was many years ago that I had my corporate career before doing the separate business with my husband, but here's what I noticed. When you are a leader and you do exercise integrity, transparency and advocacy for whatever people are with you and whatever missions you have or programs you're working on, the relationships you end up developing with people are so much higher level. You end up hiring people at a higher level, you attract people who operate at a higher level, but then there's a loyalty factor that comes in. When people know that you, as a leader, are looking out for their best interests, that you are watching them, you are looking for areas that they excel in and you're helping to promote them and display their activities and their best to other people within the organization, people tend to want to give their best and they give more and also when times get tough, they're more likely to stay on and deliver more than they would.

We have identified that we need to have our leaders with integrity, transparency and advocacy and as you know, we've got listeners from all levels of management and all around the world, so some of them are going to say, "I know I'm lacking in one of these. What do you do to develop it?"

Well, the best thing I found is experience. It really is. Prior to my corporate career, one of the other background experiences I had which was fantastic, I worked as an executive recruiter. So I was early on in my career, I learned so much recruiting vice presidents, general managers and just finding out and applying them for their backgrounds and where they made mistakes and here's what I always noticed, people who developed empathy, wisdom, I would say, stick to it ness and a stronger skin, they wouldn't fall apart every time something went wrong.

The individuals that went through tough times and didn't run away but tried to pull themselves up by the boot straps. So that would be the first answer I'd go. It might not be what everybody wants to hear but in order to develop those soft skills, you have to go through some of those people to people experiences but then there's more to it. It's getting feedback. How about if you think, "Well, you know, I'm really great in some areas. I do know how to get results but I

don't think I'm always as smooth as I can be with other people." Well, I would say step out of your own box and ask some people that you like or that seem to like you and that you trust and ask them for some feedback. One of the good questions is you might want to say, "Well, I know this bit you are contributing in today's meeting but I noticed a lot of other people were on the quiet side. Tell me what you were seeing in the meeting. Give me some feedback that you felt would be helpful for the next time we go into a meeting." That takes a big person to do that if they're the leader but I'll tell you it's extraordinarily helpful. And I would say invite involvement from other people, invite collaboration and it's in those exchanges with people that we end up learning how to listen, how to contribute and how to again work toward common goals.

And it's amazing. Group dynamics, when they're handled in a good way especially with a leader who listens and learns how to ask good questions, that's some of the best ways to help oneself acquire those soft skills. And it still comes back to everyone being in this safe environment. The team's being safe in terms of sharing those feelings and that information.

True. And now that you're even saying that this might be a good opportunity to add a little caveat as a leader, as the manager, as the CEO. So you know, I want everyone's feedback but before we get started, let's come up with a couple of ground rules. Yeah. Let's talk about some of the things we like and some of the things that we can improve. Let's make sure that when we use our language, we're using it in instructive ways rather than destructed because the whole purpose of what we're doing here is to take us from A to B to C to D and as a group, we all learn how to work better together. And I think by setting the tone, setting the atmosphere, even in small meetings or one-on-ones and by modeling it, you end up acquiring, developing and acquiring the very soft skills you're looking for because you're starting to establish an atmosphere of what is our idea of trust? How do we speak with one another? How do we interact? And I'll tell you one thing, one success will beget another.

We're going to take a break now in this very informative discussion with Maura Sweeney. Please join us for part two, but for now I'm Kim Baillie, Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec.