

Episode 315: Be a Better Leader By Embracing Radical Humility with Urs Koenig

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Mamie Kanfer Stewart 00:00

Managers, we've got a tough role. We have to be both leading people and managing to get the work done. But what if those two things were actually aligned, making our job easier and our team members more effective. Today's guest is Urs Koenig, a former United Nations military Peacekeeper and NATO military peacekeeping commander. He is highly accomplished as an endurance champion, a widely published professor and a seasoned executive coach and keynote speaker with more than three decades of experience helping hundreds of leaders and dozens of executive teams unlock new levels of achievement across four continents. He is the founder of the radical humility Leadership Institute and speaks frequently on the topic of leadership to corporations and associations across the globe. A warm welcome to Juanita N, Brandy S and Christen C to Podcast Plus. In the extended episode Urs explains how to lead like a compass, one of the key shifts managers must make to lead with radical humility. Now, here's the conversation.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:00

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Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:10

Thank you so much for joining me today Urs, as I'm so excited to dive in to the topic of your book around radical humility, and how we can improve ourselves as managers and leaders in our organizations. So thank you so much for joining me.

Urs Koenig 01:25

Thanks for having me. I appreciate it.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:27

So I always like to start with the big picture. Can you give us the high level? What is radical humility? And why is it important that we think about ourselves in our work and how we show up through this lens.

Urs Koenig 01:42

Humility or radical humility really has three main parts. The first part is developing deep self awareness, seeing myself in line with how they want to see us. And, you know, for us managers, we do 360s, we ask for feedback, never enough, we should do more of that. So that's the self awareness piece. That's the first piece. The second piece is leading relationally. Today, as leaders, we're facing an inversion of expertise, meaning our people always know so much more than we ever can about their specific area. For them to come to us with the information data we so clearly rely on as the leaders, they need to trust us. And the only way they'll trust us is if we've built meaningful and cooperative relationships for them. So rather than leading by expertise only, leading relationally is the second piece. And the third sort of leg of the stool is embracing the famous growth mindset, right? So seeing mistakes, setbacks and failures, as an opportunity for learning and growing, versus something to be ashamed of, or even worse sweep under the carpet. So these are the sort of the three main areas of leading with radical humility. Why is it important? Two main reasons. The first piece is really our external environment is dictating it. The times where the command control leader who sits on top of the org chart and has all the data, all the information and makes all the calls him or herself are dually over. If we sort of subscribe to decentralized leadership paradigm from the top, we always end up being a step behind, we need to have our people empowered at the frontlines to make good smart decisions. So the the environment, the fast moving complex world dictates it. And then secondly, our workforce dictates it, there's so many studies showing that employees are most engaged when we actually care for them on a personal level, when we build meaningful and trusting relationships with them. And that's more true for Gen Z's and Y's than it ever has been before. So it's the external environment, and it's the workforce that demands it.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 03:59

That makes so much sense that, right, it's both a matter of what was working before, it doesn't work anymore because of the external world, but also because of what's happening inside with our people, that it's, it's not working anymore. Can you maybe give some examples of what was acceptable or what was working and what we need to do now instead of those things, to kind of make it a little more real for us?

Urs Koenig 04:26

Absolutely. So you know, really asking our team members for feedback on what we can do better as a leader in the manager was not really you know, that half a priority in the past, but it sure is now. So getting into the habit and often talk about do this as a regular thing during your one on one at the end of every one on one which hopefully you hold every week, at least every 10 days. Actually the research shows you asked for simply what can I do better as a leader? What can I do better? As a manager, and what do you see me do well, and instead of making it this one off, big thing you ask every six or 12 month, get in the habit of doing this on a regular basis. When I was deployed on my peacekeeping missions, I did this in my weekly one on ones and I learned a ton of stuff that I could sort of prevent before it became a big topic or a big issue. So the the asking for feedback. And then, you know, the second piece or another piece is, of course, showing up with some vulnerability, owning our own shortfalls and mistakes. And I think it's fair to say that probably wasn't all that common or acceptable back then. But it really needs to be now of course, Brene Brown, you know, the queen of vulnerability and shame has brought this to the forefront, she talks about the fact that vulnerability is the last thing I want to show you. And the first thing I'm looking for in you, you know, we all admire perfection from a distance, but nobody can relate to it. So it's really an analysis a cliché, saying, but bringing our whole self to work, as you know, our as the work and private self sort of blends and morphs, we need to be able to bring our whole self to work and make it safe for our people to do the same.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 06:20

I want to go back to this feedback piece, because so many managers struggle to get their team members to actually give them feedback, even when they're asking. So I hear you saying why we have to ask more, we need to ask regularly, are there other things that we can and should be doing to cultivate that environment where we can get our team members to tell us the truth about you know, what's working and what's not working for them?

Urs Koenig 06:48

That's an excellent question. And I get this quite a lot like how can I actually make it safe for my team members to open up to us? So one thing I tell folks is to actually explicitly address the issue, say, I know it can be uncomfortable giving your boss feedback, I've sometimes feel the same with my boss, but I actually see your ability to give me feedback, good, good and bad as part of your professionalism. So so that's number one. So addressing the it head on. The second piece, I found really valuable is to volunteer something, say something like, I know, I need to get better at bringing everybody along on a team when I on the team and I make a decision. And I'm working on that. How do you perceive me as doing on the goal I set for myself. So instead of just having them give feedback to us, I invite my team members to give me feedback on a goal I set for myself. So it sort of, you know, takes it externally a little bit and makes it safer. And those two things I found with myself and clients really work well. And it's a it's a habit, right, it's not going to be perfect the first time around. But if we get in the regular

habit of every week, ask at the end of the one on one. What do I do? Well, what can I do better? People will over time, give you honest feedback.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 08:12

Yeah, I can't wait to try those with my team members, although they're pretty good at giving me feedback. But I definitely don't want to try some of those out. I want to go into the self knowledge piece that you mentioned earlier, too, because I feel like feedback is part of the way that we get to know our ourselves better, right? how other people are perceiving us?

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 08:29

What are some of the other ways that we can build our self awareness and understand ourselves better so that we can show up more accurately to how we want to show up and really understand how our customers or clients, our team members are perceiving us that we're really like living into our best selves.

Urs Koenig 08:45

I think about this as an iterative process. So it's asking for feedback sort of the external world and you correctly pointing out not just our team members, our peers, our customers, our suppliers, but then introspection. So actually spending time reflecting on my own leadership and a wonderful tool I know a lot of leaders are embracing is journaling, actually writing down, even on daily basis? How do I feel about my leadership today? What have I done well, of the last 24 hours? And what do I want to work on for the next 24 hours, so in so in, and we can go to the mindfulness area as well, which is not my speciality or my expertise, but that too, can help. So, introspection, whatever it is for you, journaling, meditation, and then go back into the world, and ask for feedback. So this iterative process backwards and forwards, I see work really well.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 09:43

I wonder if you have any personal stories or client stories of folks who have kind of gone through some of these processes and really discovered new things about themselves.

Urs Koenig 09:53

I have a personal story from my peacekeeping and that's sort of an example of a sudden All thing being caught early, and not becoming a big thing. So when I was deployed on my first mission, I went back after having been out of 22 years out of the service back into the military, I would come back from the field, and I would drop my sidearm on the desk beside me and I start to work right away on my computer. Now, this was okay in the old days, but today, your side arm has to be either locked up or be carried on your body. And I had no clue, no self awareness, right that it was robbing my team, my officers really the wrong way. And so when I invited during my one on one some feedback on what can I do better as a leader, I wasn't expecting that. But it was brought up like, you can't just leave your side on the desk, you have to either carry it on your body, or lock it up. And so this is a small, tiny thing, which because I asked regularly for feedback never became a big thing. And it wasn't this big thing that the team would talk about my back about. So I could fix it immediately. And it never became an issue again. So that's one small example. And the point really, is that when we ask regularly for feedback, and get input from our team members to small things, get caught early, and they don't become this big elephant in the room.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 11:16

Oh, yes. And that is always the worst situation when you haven't spoken up with someone else hasn't spoken up. And then what was small becomes big and is very big and messy and hard to deal with.

Urs Koenig 11:28

You know, decide on that happens to be my personal example. But it can be anything what I just did to you interrupting, right. So if you interrupt constantly, or if you show up dismissive to the input of one particular team member, all these, you know, seemingly smaller things for you, then never become big things. If you invite that feedback.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 11:50

Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 11:51

I want to talk about the Ted Lasso practice, kind of raising your voice says your situation here. Because this is an unusual, I've never even heard this as a technique before, for getting your team to pay attention to you. So maybe I'll just set the stage first, which is we're changing gears

away from feedback. I don't even know how to set the phrase, maybe you can set this stage of like, what is this technique? Why why is it useful? When is it useful? Just Just lay it all out for us?

Urs Koenig 12:21

Yeah, so it's, you know, I've just painted this long and hard. And I write about this in the book to include this even in, in a book on Radical Humility. So the point is that raising your voice, can be an effective leadership tool at times, if it's us, used very, very sparingly. So I'm not talking about swearing, I'm not talking about calling people names. I'm talking about raising your voice if you need to get the team's attention. So Ted Lasso. So you know, I don't know, I don't have to recall the whole scene now here. But, you know, he goes off at one of his star players, Jamie Tart, who openly dismisses cultural assets invitation for practice. And that's a red line for Ted Lasso. So and so he starts to, you know, raise his voice or even yell at Jamie talk in front of the whole team. And so, at times, very sparingly, when people cross your red line, whatever your red line is, it might be a team value that's openly dismissed or being disrespectful to another team member, raising your voice in front of everybody can be an effective technique, because you put the line in the sand, that's where it ends. And you send a message not only to the person you raise your voice to, but to the whole team who's watching who probably is thinking the same thing as them as you are like this is unacceptable is the person is the leader going to do something about it. And so if it's used sparingly, not swearing, not name calling, notice the difference. raising your voice can be an effective tool to get the team's attention. But again, I want to point out, if you do this all the time, of course, it totally loses its its benefit. I did once during my deployment with my team in nine months once and it got the team's attention. Big time.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 14:17

You know, as I said, I had never really like heard of this as a technique. But as I'm kind of thinking back to some of the different work experiences I've had, I was in a meeting once where someone says and that was super inappropriate. And the meeting leaner just stopped the conversation and was like, This is not okay. what was just said is not okay. This like and really, like, totally, like, took the meeting topic off the agenda and just made us all realize that what had just happened was unacceptable, and that it could not happen again. And it was one person being very disrespectful to another and that we just all needed to like really hear that and I remember They didn't necessarily yell or raise their voice. But it was a stern addressing to the group. And it was so powerful. And I definitely walked out of there being like, well, now I never want to never want that to happen again. Right?

Urs Koenig 15:15

All right, you don't have to yell lower or raise his voice. Stern. And you know, we normally say, praise in public criticize in private, right? There are some times and this is why leadership is a thinking person sport, right? There's no right answer for every situation. So in this moment, with your leader, you heard the message everybody else on the team heard the message. And I'm sure you know, something like that did not happen again, because the leader stepped in, put the foot down, and the message was heard.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 15:48

Yeah, absolutely. And I guess what what you've said before, too, is that it really requires you knowing what are your boundaries are what are the team's boundaries, so that when they've been crossed, you can address it in the moment, and to how to do so respectfully. But with that straightforward, clarity and seriousness, that the situation warrants so that everybody understands. And I joke like, with my kids, when I try to like discipline that they just like laugh at me, because I never discipline them. And so you have to, like have they call it the mom look like you need to be able to look at your kids and just give them that look where they know, you mean business? Apparently, I don't have it. So I'm working on it. But I feel like as a manager, right, you have to be able to hold that presence. And if you're not used to doing it, because it's a very, you know, rare tool or technique, you really need to be able to like, own that moment, and not show that you're, you know, you're you're timid or right, right, you need to be serious about it as to your point of like, take control the situation. And then what do you do? Is the follow up? Do you need to follow up with folks like, do you need to check in with them afterwards? Do you just let your your team kind of let it soak in for them and walk away? Can you go back into the meeting, if you've just like said this is not okay. And now. All right, where were we on agenda number two? Like what what have you do if we actually get to the point of having one of those moments?

Urs Koenig 17:12

Well, again, it sort of sound like a lawyer, but it depends on the situation, I actually think that if you read it, you know, it's important that it's something that you strongly actually feel about as a leader, obviously, right? Otherwise, you wouldn't step in like a value that, you know, the team holds, dear, that you hold dear, I think one of the most powerful way is to just let it sit. I don't think it's very effective to go back and, you know, qualify and you know, potentially apologize for being too firm. If you feel your message is on target, let it sit. And then I would always follow up with the person who was sort of, you know, the offender, one on one, of course, doing the one on one and talk to that person about what went down. And what we're all learning from that.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 18:00

Makes perfect sense. Love this.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 18:02

Okay, let's shift gears again. And well, why don't you tell me what is one of your favorite techniques or approaches that you write about in the book that managers can, can use to help themselves in their teams.

Urs Koenig 18:15

I love the notion of building trust with vulnerability. And that's often misunderstood. We think we need to have trust first, before we can show up with vulnerability. But I write the numerous occasions in the book as I actually cite the study where pairs of complete strangers are brought into a lab and they're asked to respond to ask and respond to meaningful questions such as, if you only had one year to live, what would you change? Or what does love and friendship mean to you? When these participants in the lab are asked after 45 minutes to raise the level of trust, they're built with their partners, they raised the level of trust about as high as the average level of trust they have with their people in their lives. Some even rated as high as the trust they have with their significant others after 45 minutes and one parent I love is one pair got married even. So the research clearly shows that showing up with vulnerability with appropriate vulnerability and we can have a chat what that looks like, is the quickest way to build trust. During my peacekeeping command. I had my commanding officer open an after action review. It's a post mortem, basically, where we talk about what went well and what didn't. With these words, she said, I screwed that up, and I know it and because she opened the after action review with owning her mistakes. It then made it safe for all of us her direct reports to do the same. So vulnerability, the research shows experience shows is the quickest way to build trust fast. Now often do this. When I do a team coaching, engagement or facilitation. I do the penny exercise I give everybody a penny. And then everybody shares something significant that happened to them during the year that's imprinted on the penny, and asked the leader to go first. And it's amazing how people who work together for a long time discover something new and different about each other. When they share with vulnerability, you know, maybe a painful divorce, feeling lost in a job, whatever it might be. And the trust increases immediately because we share with vulnerability and it makes for more productive and for for a more for a for a better meeting, or a coaching engagement.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 20:32

What an easy and fun activity that everyone can do with our team now to either like, pass out a penny or have everyone picking you randomly. It's such a such a clever way to increase the vulnerability and light and not kind of like a serious, heavy, scary kind of way for folks.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 20:48

Are there other any other tips you have around appropriate vulnerability, because you mentioned that word earlier and said we could talk about what's what's an appropriate way to be vulnerable? So any thoughts on that?

Urs Koenig 20:58

Right? So again, things versus good, right? So I think what one of the push backs that sometimes get is, what if my people don't want to go deep, and you know, some people don't want to, you know, discuss their deepest fears. And as a leader, I need to be okay with that. The fact that I will have different depth of relationships with different members on the team. And that's totally fine with some people, we might just do a bit of small talk about the weekend. And other people want to talk about deep stuff, immediately, whatever it is, you know, end of life decisions, whatever it might be. And so, being okay, as a leader, without being doesn't mean that we're like a fake or a phony, to have different levels of depth with different members on our teams. That's that's just how it goes. And then, you know, we got to be mindful and pay attention in the moment. You know, this is the things that are hard to teach, but we can practice reading the other person, is the other person opening up, or are they shutting down and then closing in on those signals? And then asking more questions or sort of holding back a bit. So it's different with every people very person on the team.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 22:05

Yeah, I had this with one of my colleagues where she wasn't feeling well. And she just kept telling me, like, I need to take a sick day, I need to take a sick day. And I was like, of course, of course, I totally get it. And then finally, I was like, what is going on? You know, are you okay? And after, you know, two weeks of basically telling me like, I'm okay, I just did a little time, there's still time, but she finally opened up about what was really happening. And it was like, Oh, my gosh, if I had known, I could have been so much more helpful, kind of, you know, I could have been here to support you in a new way. So it really does make a difference when you have those conversations, and you pay attention to what's going on for your people.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 22:41

All right, I want to shift gears one more time and talk about The Marshmallow Tower study, and how teams communicate and take risks. Can you tell us about this one?

Urs Koenig 22:54

So this is The Marshmallow Challenge. Some of your listeners and viewers maybe have actually done this as a team building activity. It's 20 pieces of uncooked spaghetti, some scotch tape and some string and the marshmallow and you have 17 minute minutes in your team to build a tower as high as possible. The competition has one rule, the marshmallow has to be on top at the end. And so I actually tell the story in my keynote speeches. So there's kindergarteners who compete and Harvard MBAs and who and you know, there's other competitions between kindergarteners and CEOs, kindergarteners and lawyers, and kindergarteners consistently outperform MBAs, lawyers and CEOs, why they don't have more skills. They don't have better talent, because they're fearless. Because they have psychological safety. MBAs when they're, when they're starting to build their tower. They're organized, they keep track of their time they make a plan, but they're distracted with managing their own ego and status. Who should be in charge? What will they think, you know, we look stupid, but the kindergartners they're not afraid. They don't compete for who should be CEO of Spaghetti Inc. They start to build immediately and experiment. And they're not afraid to fail. So it's sort of is a nice story to tie up the importance of psychological safety of having a fearless culture. MBAs are not fearless. They're worried about their status and ego. kindergarteners are totally fearless. And they kick Harvard's behind every single time.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 24:29

I love this, oh, my gosh, I and I've done this activity with teams before. And it's always so fascinating and so easy to do, right? Especially if you're in person, it's harder to do as a remote project. But if you're in person, it's such a fun way to see your team dynamics play out in real time. And you know, who takes charge and who kind of steps back and who throws out ideas and who gets their hands in there and who kind of like sits on the sidelines. I'm wondering what are some of the lessons especially around building the psychological safety and making it safe to take risks and experiment and try things. What are some of the practical ways that we can bring those lessons into our team and create that environment where people aren't competing with their ego.

Urs Koenig 25:11

So the first lesson that we can bring in, is to reframe failure for our team members. Meaning to explicitly say that this will not be a perfect project, this won't be a perfect client deliverable, I still have high standards, I'm still we're still shooting for the moon, but mistakes will happen. And if they do, we need to be open about it. And I will share my mess ups, I'll make them as a leader. And I need everybody on the team to do the same. So reframing failure for our team members is an important first step we have to take to build the fearless cultural, psychological, safe

culture, and then the, you know, encouraging, speaking up, right, praising the messenger versus punishing the messenger. And then the important last piece, which is very hard, is acknowledging and thanking input, even if we disagree, I always talked to my clients about this, we always ask as leaders, we always thank we always listen, but we get to decide what we're acting on. So the fact that I thank you for your input doesn't mean that I'm agreeing. But I say thank you for bringing this to my attention. And then you get to decide if and how you act on it or not.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 26:30

That's a good way back to getting feedback to write let's not just because somebody gives us feedback doesn't mean we need to accept it.

Urs Koenig 26:38

No, leadership is not a popularity contest that and that's actually very important. I sometimes get pushback because of you know, humility. Am I being emotional doormat? Absolutely, absolutely not. We always ask, we always listen, we always thank but we get to decide, because ultimately, it is our responsibility of leaders for what happens in the team. All right.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 26:59

Well, I think this is where we have to wrap up because we're running out of time. So Urs can you tell us about a great manager that you worked for, and what made this person such a fabulous boss?

Urs Koenig 27:07

I had the best commander during my peacekeeping mission in Kosovo a few years ago. And the reason why he was the best boss, the best manager, the best commander I've ever had is because he built real meaningful and deep relationships with us. And he held us to the highest standards, and it's exemplified I write about this in the book, he called me into his office, I sat down and he opened our meeting like this, he says, I love yours, he literally said that, you know, I do. And this work is not good enough. And his words made me shrink in my chair, if he would have, you know, yelled at me, or put me down, I probably would have tuned him out. But because I knew he really cared about me on a personal level, he knew me, he was able to deliver a feedback, and I was able to hear it. So that's one of the good managers, one of the many good managers I've worked for, during my career.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 28:02

What a fabulous quote to, "I love you and this work isn't good enough." Fabulous.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 28:09

All right, and where can people learn more about you tell us what's the name of your book? How can people get a copy of it?

Urs Koenig 28:14

Sure. So my book is [Radical Humility: Be a Dadass Leader, and a Good Human](#), you can find it on Amazon, Barnes and Noble everywhere where books are sold. And for my keynote, speaking and facilitation, my website is my first and last name, urskoenig.com, where you can find all the information you need. So I can be of service to.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 28:36

Fabulous. There's definitely a lot more in the book that we didn't get to. So highly recommend people check it out. Thank you again, for joining me today.

Urs Koenig 28:43

Thank you so much for having me, Mamie.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 28:44

This week, Urs is providing members of Podcast Plus a PDF of the radical humility now leadership prompts. These exercises from the book can help you apply radical humility in your leadership and life. To get this guest bonus and many more, become a member at themodernmanager.com/more. All the links are in the show notes, and they can be delivered to your inbox when you subscribe to my newsletter. Find that at themodernmanager.com. Thanks again for listening. Until next time.

