Episode 298: Using Rituals to Create Certainty in Times of Change with Ashley Goodall

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Mamie Kanfer Stewart 00:00

We know that the world is constantly changing, and that living with so much uncertainty takes its toll. What's not so obvious is the strategies that we've developed as individuals and a team for navigating that instability and uncertainty that comes with modern life. But with a little intention, there's actually a lot we can do to help our people and ourselves find solid footing despite the shifting environment. A warm welcome to Matt C to the Modern Manager community. Today's guest is Ashley Goodall. Ashley is a leadership expert who has spent his career exploring large organizations from the inside, most recently as an executive at Cisco. He is the co author of nine lies about work, which was selected as the best management book of 2019 by strategy and business and as one of Amazon's best business and leadership books of 2018. Prior to Cisco, he spent 14 years as a lawyer, as a consultant and as the chief learning officer for leadership and professional development. His book The problem with Change publishes this coming May. Ashley and I talk about the challenges of constant change and the impact it has on us and our team members. He also shares how managers can use rituals to create a sense of certainty and stability. And hint, it's not just useful during times of change, and in the extended interview available to members of podcast plus actually shares a massive a finding Ramiz research on how managers can create predictability as leaders as well as how language plays an important role. Now, here's the conversation.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:11

Are you a manager, boss, or team leader who aspires to level up and unleash your team's full potential? You're listening to The Modern Manager podcast, and I'm your host, Mamie Kanfer Stewart. Each week, I explore effective strategies and provide actionable insights that supercharge your management abilities, optimize team performance, and foster a healthy workplace culture. Become a rockstar manager and help your team thrive at themodernmanager.com/more.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:58

Thank you so much for joining me today, Ashley. I was just saying how much I enjoyed reading your book, and super excited to dive into this topic of change and how we as managers can navigate this kind of constant world of change that we are finding ourselves living in, in professional contexts, and where just all the stuff that comes with that, all the problems that come with it and all and you know, some of the solutions, you lay out that we can start to help ourselves and our team members get some solid grounding in our workplaces. So thank you for joining me.

Ashley Goodall 02:31

It's wonderful to be here.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 02:32

What is this problem we have right now with change where it's like constantly, things are just never stable anymore? Can you kind of just give us some grounding around what what is happening in the world right now, especially in the workplace, where there's just constant changes happening?

Ashley Goodall 02:47

The book is an attempt to say, Okay, what's behind all the constant change? And is it actually as good as everybody claims it is to conflict, if you like the we start with maybe conflict is a bit of a strong word. But the tension is that if you listen to the sorts of people who run organizations, or the people who advise the people who run organizations, or the people who evaluate the people who advise the people who run the org, and all of those folks, if you list all of them, they will say change is a jolly good thing, that if they're not British, they might not say a jolly good thing, they'd say something, but they'll say changes this change stuff. Fantastic, the more the better. In fact, our job as leaders is to make change, and more of it, and more of the time, because change is always up into the right in life. But if you go and talk to the people on the receiving end, the people on the front lines of organizations, the people who show up every day, trying to do a job, they will say to you, it's too much, it makes it hard to do what I am trying to do. I mean, I know what my company needs me to do. And I'm trying to do these things. But it is very hard to operate in an atmosphere of ongoing uncertainty and lack of control and where the teams keep getting jumbled up. And where I'm not sure what the point of my job is from one day to the next because everybody keeps changing the rules. And so we have this bizarre situation, if you like where the where the top of organizations are making as much change as they can and spinning the change flywheel as fast as they can. And the people at the bottom are going stop it. Stop it, I can't do the work now. Because it's just too difficult to figure out which way is up, or

whether I whether I'm having any impact in the world. And so the problem with changes, it doesn't lead to improvement. That's the problem.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 04:48

That's a very bold statement. And also, I think, most people's live reality that we are, we try to make positive changes, but they don't often lead to the outcomes that we anticipate and knowledge say I don't run a very big organization is just me and two other team members. And I have to hold myself back from constantly wanting to make changes, like, oh, let's try this new system for our task management, it's gonna be so much better. And it will solve all these problems. And my one colleague, I told her that you have to hold me accountable to not changing platforms, because I am one of those people that there's always something better if we just keep trying new things, keep changing our strategy, launching a new program. And it's true that if I look back, it's not they have not all panned out the way that I believed they would. And I can only imagine inside of a large organization, how disruptive that can feel when things are constantly being shifted underneath you.

Ashley Goodall 05:45

Well, yeah, I mean, the lesson from what you just said is the change and improvement aren't the same thing. Yeah, and change doesn't necessarily imply improvement. Obviously, most of us know that for something to be better. It's got to be different from how it is now. So we're, we're in the ballpark, I suppose. There's a lot of decision making in large organizations that isn't particularly well informed by what it's like on the front lines. And so what seems like a nice new shiny, what was your example task management system? It's like we will have, that'll be great, won't it? And everyone's like, well, I just learned the last one. Hang on. Now you're going to now I've got to learn this thing. It's going to take a week or a couple of days, or whatever. And those are two days that you never get back. And is it really worth that. And even if in one case, that might be true, or it might be necessary if then next week, there's another thing, and then the following week, there's another thing and then the following week, there's another thing, pretty soon people stop investing their energy and attention in the jobs, which is not, you know, what leaders actually are trying to achieve with all of the change. So it is it is counterproductive?

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 06:57

Yeah, it reminds me of the flavor of the week concept that I've heard from some managers doesn't matter what I bring to my team, they're just gonna look at it and say, This is the new flavor of the week, let's just wait a week, and then it'll be gone. And there'll be a new flavor of the week. And, you know, and that is definitely not the type of engagement that we want from our team members.

Ashley Goodall 07:15

No, and of course, that just to jump to the advice portion and the advice, if your team is saying we think this is the flavor of the week, then the advice would be don't have a flavor this week, keep the flavor from last week, and dry it on for a little bit longer. But you know, what's interesting is that even even in that little example, we teach people what to expect in the work environment. And so, and people are smart, and people are really good observers of their work environment. And so if if you make a lot of changes, and you don't take the course on some of them, and you're you're forever tweaking, sooner or later, people will stop paying attention to each one. And they'll go precisely, well, it's just like, I just tune out for a week, and then I'll, I'll get the next one that comes along next Monday. And I don't need to pay attention.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 08:05

And that is just as big of a problem, I think as the one you mentioned your book too, which is we jump on a change. And then we never stop to reevaluate whether or not this change is still worth pursuing. Can you chat about that a little bit?

Ashley Goodall 08:17

Well, I think one of the hardest things for a leader, actually is to think better of something. I mean, the condition of being the leader of a team or the leader of an organization or leader of a function, that condition is, it's very hard to know whether you've done the right thing, but it's also at the same time, a situation in which you feel that you are you need to put the best face on things. And that people need you to be in some way strong and clear and consistent. And so there are all these sort of things that swim into your head when when you become a leader. And very low on that list is have second thoughts about something very low on that list is is to say to everybody, you know what, we tried this for a little while and it doesn't work. My bad as you were like the number of leaders who have the courage and the integrity to ever take something back, undo something is vanishingly vanishingly small. And it's partly because the world it's partly because if I make you a leader, you bring a whole bunch of your own expectations and some of the expectations you might well bring to that role are that I that I need to be right about stuff. I need to be I need to be infallible. And so I can't go around changing course the whole time, just based on things aren't going very well. I think obviously, given that I've written half a book about this, the the world would be a better place if leaders had the courage to turn around once in a while and go This isn't working. There's a Light version of this that you do run across where leaders go, This isn't working. So we're having a course correction, which is code for my change didn't work. So I'm going to have another change on top of that change. But I think it's vanishingly rare, as I said that people go, you know, this isn't working, nevermind, as you were, or this isn't working a team, what would you have done to remedy this problem before I clumped

all over the place and made a big mess of things, a little bit more humility, from leaders would go a long way to alleviating some of these sorts of problems that we're talking about?

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 10:36

Well, before we get to some of the other ideas and suggestions that you have, for how we can navigate and support our teams, when we're in this environment of change. Can you talk a little bit about the toll that change puts on people and the challenges that we experience when we're in that kind of constant state of change?

Ashley Goodall 10:53

One of the funniest things that strikes you as soon as you start pushing into this topic of change, the first thing that you meet is that everyone thinks it's great, this of the leaders at least, the second thing is if you go and look at the effects of change on the human psyche, you find that almost all negative. So psychologically change is really hard on humans. It's not like changes, basically, psychologically good, but sometimes it's not. It's like basically, the the things that change visits on somebody are very hard for people to deal with. There are a few different flavors of sort of psychological difficulty. One is that of course, as soon as I say, Hello, everybody, I'm going to make a change, then what immediately happens is something called uncertainty, uncertainty. There's all sorts of science about how uncertainty is very hard on people and causes all sorts of stress, and actually physical health problems even. The second thing that happens when I say I'm going to make a change is that I'm reminding you that you actually don't have any control and lack of control is very, very hard on on humans. The most famous I suppose a one of the most famous experiments in terms of control was done in the 1960s by Martin Martin Seligman, and led to the phrase or the phenomenon of learned helplessness, where in fact, if I, if I keep reminding you that you don't control any outcome, sooner or later you stop trying to exert any control over your environment. In other words, you found it in, I don't know, what do we what do we read about today, we read about the great resignation and quiet quitting and laser girl jobs and coffee, badging and all of those things. They're all different phrases for phoning it in. And I think it's not hard to connect the lack of control that people feel over their work environment with all of these trends, if you like, for sort of funding and there's uncertainty, there's control, then then, of course, the next thing that happens when I say, Hello, everybody, I'm making a change, as you imagine, I'm going to change the teams, and change the social structures at work. And often, of course, in a reorg, or a firing or any sort of thing that moves people from jobs, to jobs to jobs, what you're doing is changing teams. And as I hope we'll talk about in a little bit teams are an enormous source of stability at work and an enormous source of support for us all. So if you're going to shred the teams, then they then you're, you're not helping people do the work that you need them to do. Connected to team is a sense of place. Humans love place, they love ritual in place. So we all have a morning routine, or many of us do. And you have little routines at work, which connect the sort of rhythm

of a day, and a particular place or set of places those things get ripped up pretty quickly, as soon as you set out on some big change initiative. And the last one is that it's very hard for people to make sense of their jobs, when things are constantly changing. And we are sense makers, as the human animal is a big sense maker we love we love stories, stories help us comprehend the world and understand how the world relates to us. And if you show up at work on a Monday, and somebody says, well, actually your department is no longer about this, but it's about this you're like, Well, the story changed. Hang on, does that mean that I'm no longer where's my thing in all of that? i It doesn't. I don't know what my work means anymore. And that's really hard on us too. So you look across that that was sort of a little bit of a an answer there. But if you look across those those things, if you look at uncertainty control, below hanging on a team, our identification with place and ritual and our sense of meaning. Those all go pretty quickly out of the window when we launch a change initiative, and those are all essential to human health and contribution.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 15:17

And I'm imagining that one solution could be, well, we just don't initiate changes anymore. But that's probably unrealistic to some extent. I'm wondering, especially about this role of team since you know, people who are listening are in the enrolls of managers, which could be of a small team, or could be a department or could be an entire organization, can you talk a little bit about the role of the team in creating stability and creating a sense of meaning or continuity, so that if change is thrust upon you, by your organization? Like what is it that managers actually have influence over that? And how can we kind of support our team members to not have so much uncertainty and so much feeling of lack of control, and less sense of belonging and all those problems that you just mentioned.

Ashley Goodall 16:07

I'm not sure we're ever going to have none change, I'm not sure we should, because improvement does come from change. But also an improvement comes from change, I'm just arguing we should think twice about it, we should, we should have a higher bar. And if we were aware of how hard it makes people to do the work that we've hired them to do, we might, we might think harder about it, the lovely thing about teams, is they are the home of stability in so many different ways. Because when you join a team, you sort of quickly figure out that the other people are not you. And they can do things that you can't do. And so now you're plugged into this sort of little orchestration of differing abilities. And so you can get help, and you can help others in return. And even that sense that I can benefit from skills that I don't myself have, is a little bit of stability, if you like, because now if we need somebody to write the advertising copy, or the marketing copy for such and such, but I'm not great at doing that, but I've got a teammate who can, and I can just design the cadence of the campaign, then great, okay. Now, now we are a little bit stronger in ourselves, because we have more collective ability that we can deploy

against the world. And we're also a little bit insulated against the change of somebody saying you can't do X. So we're going to create a change, and people will come in who can, who can do whatever the thing is, teams at work or home for many, many, many sort of stability, making things and team leaders can do a super important job in creating stability for people, not always in response to change, by the way, but in anticipation of change. And this is this is the trick about the stability management game, if you like you have to be doing it the whole time. Because you don't always control when the change arrives.

Ashley Goodall 18:08

And so you, you want to give people an environment that bolsters them, if you like, against change. So some of the things are, get to know your teammates, understand what your strengths are, understand what their strengths are, understand where you can help one another build rituals into the week of a team. And I don't mean incense and chanting. I mean, have things that happen predictably every Monday or every Friday, or have a way to start the day together, or have a way to end the day together. There was one I discovered a team in the pandemic that had been co located and was now all working from home, missed that team ritual, which was that as everybody left the office for the day, they would walk down the corridor and shout out, I'm heading out see you all tomorrow. And this couldn't happen because they were no longer in an office. So they created a team space just for doing that there was some room on Slack or whatever that was called the corridor. And then as you left your home office for the day and went off to, you know, get the kids from school or or feed the dog or cooking supper or whatever. You would just post in the room, heading out for the night, see all tomorrow, and they virtualized this thing because it was so important to them to still have that ritual that closed a day for a group of people working together. And there's something so beautiful in that. It's simple, but it's human and you hear about it and you just want to smile. You're like God, I want to be on the team that thinks about those sorts of things and has some slightly kooky way of doing it because it matters to them so much that they've created a ritual to close out So, so rituals on teams are a really, really important things. Most teams have them. By the way, most teams have a few, most leaders have a few. The question is, do you know what they are? And are you guarding them? If you like jealously enough, because it takes a while to build them, you can't one instance of anything isn't a ritual, one instance is a one off. So it takes a while to build them. But the question for leaders is, do you know what they are? And has your team shaped them over time? And are you honoring them going forwards.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 20:32

With rituals, do they have to be organic, like I imagined as a team leader? If I said, Alright, folks, we're going to try this thing called the corridor that I heard about where it can, it can feel kind of weird or awkward or like, you know, your team members are rolling their eyes at you like really? So to the best rituals come from the things that we organically or naturally, are already doing.

And we've we maybe with a little more intention, then shape them or solidify them into that kind of consistent usage? Or, or can we actually just start a new ritual by saying, we're starting a new tradition, we're starting a new practice, we're starting a new ritual. And if we're doing it that or that we then making it worse, because we're actually introducing a change or change getting all of that stuff?

Ashley Goodall 21:19

Yeah. So your question is, if you change the rituals, is that stability or change? To which the answer's yes, by the way, just somewhat annoying, like. The funny thing about rituals is they come in all shapes and sizes. And one of the things that's very tricky is landing, a very consistent definition of ritual. And the people who there are researchers, by the way, there are scientists who study rituals. And I think if I were not writing books about change, I would actually want to be a ritual researcher, because it's all sort of completely fascinating stuff. But one of the things that's hard for the scientist is coming, coming down to a definition in terms of, is it generated by the team? Is it generated by the leader? Is it built by the company? Is it? Because the answer to all of these questions seems to be yes, and all of the above. The defining characteristic of a ritual is actually that it allows us to control our feelings in some way they are the deaf, emotional regulators, and any any sort of thing that it's a little circular, feels ritualistic. And allows you to regulate your emotions in some way. So you're, you want to have a calm feeling at the end of the day. So you have the corridor room, that's emotional regulation, in one sense. So anything like that is a ritual, all sorts of good ones bubble up from teams. So teams will decide of them, you know, of their own volition, we're going to there will always be the morning coffee run mornings, or mornings, for some reason, a very dense with rituals. And there's a there's a lot of morning stuff, fewer evening things. But so teams will decide, well, we're going to do this or we're we're always going to have some silly thing. There was one team, I discovered were two of the people would come in fancy dress every Halloween. And it was always two characters that were related to one another. So it was Batman and Robin would be the Halloween thing. And I don't think a leader thought of that, that sort of bubbled up from the team. It's a silly thing. But you know, it's Halloween. And it's just a way of sort of marking the passage of time. And again, saying to people, this is the place still, you're still here. You're still in this, this is still recognizable as the place you come every day. And the humans you work with every day, I had another leader who instigated a ritual. And it was actually on Monday, we'll go around the team and see if anyone wants any help this week, from their teammates, on on Friday, we'll go around the team and see if anyone wants to thank somebody for help, given during the week. So it's this beautiful book end, Monday through Friday, that was all about this team will support one another, which in itself is a source of stability. And then the ritualization of support is another source of stability. And this team leader came up with that she invented it. She told everybody, this was what we were going to do. It took quite a few weeks before folks got comfortable with it. So it takes a little while for the whole thing to sort of gel. At the beginning. People said Well, I'm not going to show up on Monday and tell you where I need help with my work because it makes me look like I can't do my job. So I'm not. That's not how I'm going to start my week. But she kept going. And some brave people said I could use a hand

with this. And then on the Friday, somebody got thanked for helping somebody with the and the whole thing began to generate its own momentum, and over time became the signature of her team. And they were known as the team that was fantastic at supporting one another And the team that could handle all sorts of unexpected things. Because whenever an unexpected thing came along, they could form quickly the right group of people to work on it. So it's some some bubble up, some come from leaders, some come from countries, for goodness sakes, I mean, back when I grew up, there's a thing called the State Opening of Parliament. That's a that's a ritual, we put a monarch in a chair, and they read things. And apparently, that helps the, that helps the country be what the country is, it's some of them are some of them are weird, in terms of what is this for some of them that the connection between cause and effect is, is murky. But if you try and take them away, people get really annoyed. And that's, that's one again, back to some of the downsides of change. If you are removing the groups that had the rituals, then people lose the rituals. And people lose that little ability to have some sort of emotional regulation in their, in their working week in a world where emotional regulation is kind of a nice thing to get a bit more of.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 26:09

I never really thought about that. I've rituals as a way to regulate our emotions, or to bring us to a specific place or perspective that might come from completing that ritual. All right, there's, like the daily planning ritual that I have, as I think of it as being a productivity ritual, that's about getting to the other side so that I have my day plan. But I also see now that it's about removing the anxiety, of worrying about what I have to get done, and when is it all going to happen? So it's actually also the process of doing of doing that is bringing me to a place of calm, to start my day with the mindset of being ready for what I have ahead. That's it?

Ashley Goodall 26:52

I mean, here's the interesting question. If I told you how to do it in the evening, how would you feel?

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 26:57

I wouldn't like that. I mean, I would do it if I had to. But I wouldn't like it.

Ashley Goodall 27:02

When people mess with our rituals, we don't like it. Now, I could argue it works just as well as a planning ritual the night before as the morning off. But as an emotional preparation for the day, or as a way to get into the zone, it doesn't work nearly as well, the night before as the morning of. So it's a beautiful example that we look at things in, in, in the world of work, and we go yeah, it's just it's plastic, it's a little thing. But in fact, so many of the little things are actually really big things when it comes to our emotional health and psychological stability.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 27:40

Yes. And when you're navigating, the constant changes the these rituals are that stable ground, as you've described, and I love that it's not just about the practice itself. But as you're saying, the emotional regulation. And when we're in times of change, that's high anxiety, high stress. And these are the things that can keep us calm and consistent and focused. So love this.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 28:04

Alright, we are running out of time, though. So Ashley, can you tell us about a great manager that you worked for, and what made this person such a fabulous boss.

Ashley Goodall 28:11

We haven't talked very much about making space for people, which is another wonderful thing that managers team leaders can do to give people stability. Because if I've got space to do my thing, then I have some I have more control, I have more agency. And so I have more of the positive, emotional psychological reality that comes from feeling I'm in control. I had a manager way back in the early 20 teams will say at Deloitte called Diana O'Brien. And Diana was marvelous, because Diana gave me all sorts of space. And so I'll give you an example. There was a project at Deloitte to reinvent how we did performance ratings. And Diana came to me and said, You have been complaining about performance ratings louder than anyone else for the longest amount of time. So you're in charge, go. And she didn't say, do it like this, or do it like this, or the outcome must be this, you said, you you really care about this thing. So I'm putting you in charge. And I said, Well, what will your higher ups think? And she said, Don't worry. I told them that you're in charge, and they trust me. So you're in charge. And what she then did was to continue to give me all sorts of space to figure out what I thought the best way through was, while also sort of protecting me from organizational interference. Because if you're going to rethink something, if you're going to now this is real innovation, this is ground up innovation, if you like if you're actually going to come up with improvement, then then you need a little space to figure things out. And if everybody wants to show up every day and tell you what you're doing wrong. I'll tell you why you anoint them this thing and the thing that you said doesn't make any sense and how on earth That's not gonna work anyway, then you don't ever. And so

the other thing that Diana did was she said, Send those people to me. And I would say go talk to Diana and she would some conversation would happen, I would never hear about it again, there's a wonderful sort of manager, team leader, who says, Look, daylight is this, this is where we need to go, will you take us there, and then gives you space, and then keeps the the judgment and the interfering and the complaints. And she's not to say that everyone's perfect and not say I probably didn't do a bunch of stuff that was genuinely annoying to other people. But you can let all of that stuff shut somebody down, you can let all of that stuff, freeze somebody in place. And so Diana protected me from all of those things. And and that led to, by the way, a wholly new performance management system, Deloitte abandon doing annual ratings, annual performance reviews, went to weekly check ins, and completely changed its attitude to how to get the best out of people at work. So it was not, it was a project not without consequence for 70,000 people in it.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 31:20

Wow, amazing. And what a gift to have someone who can really give you that space and protect you from the whirlwind that often comes.

Ashley Goodall 31:29

I can remember the conversation where she said, I'm putting you in charge. And the first thing I wanted to say, and it's good job I didn't. The first thing I wanted to say was are you kidding me? I was like Christmas come early. I couldn't believe I was going to be in charge of this. It was such a statement of trust and faith and confidence, made me feel like a million bucks and made me really want to do it brilliantly well, making space signals trust to and that's a super powerful thing. That was Diana's story.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 31:57

Thank you for sharing that. And where can people learn more about you tell us about your book and where we can find it all that jazz?

Ashley Goodall 32:05

So the book is available wherever books are sold, and people can find out more about me on my website, which is I think somewhat ingeniously named ashleygoodall.com. So there's all sorts of stuff about this book about my other books and writings, and about who I am and what I

do that folks can find that, I guess what's the name of this book, this book is called [The Problem with Change](#), which I think is a good a good name, given the conversation we've just had.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 32:31

I agree. Well, thank you again, Ashley, really a pleasure to chat with you guys. There's so much more we could have gotten to but we ran out of time. So thank you again, thank you.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 32:39

Ashley is providing members Podcast Plus a 10% discount on his book [The Problem with Change](#), drawing on two decades spent leading HR organizations at Deloitte and Cisco. In this book, Ashley reveals the truth about human performance and offers a radical new alternative to the constant turbulence that defines corporate life. To get this guest bonus, the extended interview, episode guide, and many more membership resources 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.