

Jeff Haffner: 00:00

Welcome to TCN talks, and Anatomy of Leadership. We continue our part two conversation with Karen McCullough. Why generations clash at work and how great leaders fix it. And now, here's our host, Chris Comeaux.

Karen McCullough: 00:22

I'm going to say we have to get to know people. And we have to, I think sometimes these generalizations, um, I think that they're they're wrong. So, my whole idea is he and Rice and these young, these young students that created this showed me that there is there is commitment. It's just maybe putting their energy into where it wants to be.

Chris Comeaux: 00:44

Hmm. That is so good, Karen. Well, as we go to this next segment, um, man, there's so much I just thought of in what you just said. You know, um we're gonna probably include a link. I wrote a blog that was some wisdom that I harvested from Mother Teresa, one of the incredible physicians I worked with, um, and a guy who actually started a monastery in Colorado Springs modeled after Dallas Willard, and is really talking about work-life harmony. I wish I learned it in my 20s because I've been a bit of a workaholic and I've traveled internationally, and people there would say, You Americans, you just live to work. We only work to live. They have a much more beautiful work-life harmony. And it's interesting, an Uber driver picked me up at four o'clock in the morning the other day in Florida, and he was from Brazil, and asked him, I said, Hey, where's your southern accent from? And he starts telling me Brazil, and we got this fascinating conversation about life and family and food. I'm from South Louisiana, so food and family are very top of mind. But then looking back over a lot of my life, I've always struggled with that ability to have um some work-life harmony. Even though I wrote this amazing paper of wisdom that I've harvested from other people, I still work at doing this well because there's always work to be done. But yet, these other parts of life that have always been important to me, my family and just friends and just other things, I am looking at this other generation to go, I have a lot to learn there. Um, and here's the best I've come up with, Karen. It's an oscillation. There are times when you need to turn it up because whatever, there's a major deadline, major problem we're trying to solve. And then it's the wisdom of knowing when to turn it down. I have a friend who actually went to the um, it's a place in Florida. It's actually called the corporate athlete, or they teach corporate athletes. Like when professional athletes, they don't, you know, they're not the game doesn't go on 24 hours a day. There's game time where you have peak and you oscillate to get to peak performance, and then there's downtime and rest time. Whereas, like some of us that have been raised in that generation, especially Baby Boomers X, is just wide open all the time. And

then we wonder why our health fails, why we burn out, et cetera. And so, the closest I could come to that answer is this oscillation and this wisdom of work-life harmony. I don't know if that provoked some thoughts.

Karen McCullough: 03:09

I love what you're saying because I felt the same way. But fortunately, I have such a creative job. Um, and before this, I had a retail store, which was 24-7. I don't even want to go into what that was like. Right. So, in a way, becoming a speaker was a break for me because retail was just it was a killer. But what I have to learn even is how to dial it down. Right now, most I think I have two friends that are still working, but most of my friends right now who I've met on the pickleball courts are retired. And it's interesting because when they talk about work, it's not a love story. It's uh I couldn't wait for this. I put in the time. It's so I have to be open to the yes, work can be a grind. And I'm not, I just had the luxury of creating something that I loved. Uh do you ever listen to Scott Galloway? Um Scott Galloway, he's one of the guys, I listen to his podcasts a lot. Uh, I think it's Prof. Is his name, but he talks a lot about the generations. Uh, he's a professor out at uh, I think he's at Stanford. Um and he does talk about giving them the advice um in the beginning, find out what you do really well and do it. Don't don't put your energy into your passion. Sometimes your passion comes with the job that you have because you're finding in what you do really well that there's a piece that you're passionate about. He said, sometimes we focus on the wrong thing. Finding your passion. That's hard but finding the passion and what you do is a lot easier and it can then grow from that. And I love that idea of finding the parts of work that you love. I have another friend who um who talks about being bringing your ideas into your organization and being an impact rebel. And she talks about how um she talks about sustainability and how you can bring that whole idea and create a culture, a group within your organization where you're bringing your passion into it. Whereas, like the Alzheimer's at Rice University, I love this. Sometimes we have to look a little beyond what we do to see where that passion is that pulls us into work.

Chris Comeaux: 05:24

That's so good. Well, let's keep digging in here. And so you talk about a culture living in interactions, meetings, inboxes, not handbooks. What are the small leadership behaviors that either build trust across the generations or the opposite might actually quietly destroy it?

Karen McCullough: 05:43

Yeah. This is also something that I'm getting now where I'm getting calls in about um the culture, and that the culture we is in the handbook, but we're not living the culture. And it's simple things like not responding to an email, um, not saying that you're

attending a meeting, you know, no, no RSVPs, leaving the manager, the leader like out up in the air. Just very, very simple things, um, being sarcastic, um, microaggressions. I mean, we can go on and on about how we how we really treat people, you know, and we can say our culture is this way, but what is the day-to-day behaviors? And that is an interesting thing to start to look at. Where are we uh where are we letting that down? Where are we slipping? Because what they're these companies, and some several of them are here in Houston, are saying is the more we let it go, the more we're losing it. And and so this whole idea of trust, um, it it really starts with us. It starts with how we respond. So I think it's a personal responsibility to understand that our culture is being respectful to each other, being kind to each other. Um, when you're at a Zoom meeting, if they say, let's put it, keep our cameras on, put your camera on. Don't be that revel that's saying no to all of these little tiny, little, tiny things that when they add up, it can destroy a culture. And it was interesting because I thought about it through the generations and I thought about, okay, let's think about how these little these little things have really nipped away at it. And it starts with Gen X. Gen X, you started casual dress. And so, all of a sudden we didn't have to dress professionally anymore. I mean, baby boomers got upset because we wanted you to look a certain way, but casual dress came in because of the technology. So, it kind of began there with nibbling it away. And then millennials came on the scene and they said, hey, we're gonna text. You know, we're gonna we're gonna stop doing those emails. I don't want long emails anymore. Let's text. And you know, then we now we have Gen Z. Gen Z doesn't even answer a text. You know, it's so interesting how we're beginning to see the cultures change because of the generations. And so, we need to remind everyone, this is how we do it here. And we need to really bring that to the attention because in the end, I'm not asking you to compromise your values. I'm not asking you to change your culture to suit a generation. I'm saying know who you are and your brand and really identify this is the way we do it here. This is our and honor and believe in your culture, but then you have to live it.

Chris Comeaux: 08:22

Yeah, that's so good, Karen. The other thing that kind of strikes me listening to you, I totally agree with that. And you're making me even reflect. We call our orientation our bricolore base camp. The word bricolore is like a MacGyver. So, we kind of we we kind of set this ethos from the very beginning of orientation with new employees. And so, we do set those expectations. The other thing that occurs to me, though, is that we're also always willing to learn and keep adapting and keep adjusting it, but you got to have that feedback loop where they feel comfortable enough to be open and honest. Is that also part of like my generation? Well, I don't know, maybe it's just more of a learned behavior. I felt I could be bold and I could actually give feedback. It didn't

always feel that way. It probably came with my maturity, but we say that from the get-go.

Chris Comeaux: 09:11

Is that openness and that ability to communicate honestly, does that vary by generation? I realize the power structure probably is part of that as well. The higher you're up in leadership, you'll tend to be a little bit more open and honest. But is there a whole nother level just because the multiple generations there?

Karen McCullough: 09:28

Well, first of all, I learned from you. You see, sometimes I'm just theory, and then you what I have loved about my relationship with you is you've taught me so much. Even the questions I got, I need to put these questions in my keynote. He knows what he's talking about. So I want to say something that I want you to come in because you taught me about asynchronous meetings. You, you're keeping me cool. But the reality of it is it ended with Gen X. I'm sorry, millennials, but this is just, and I'm gonna generalize from what I'm hearing when I do groups and small millennials um need to learn how to give really good feedback that is honest because they they don't want to rock the boat. They want not all of you, I say I don't want to generalize, but I have to. Many millennials are so they want that team to be open and caring. They want to create these these really good teams so they're afraid to rock the boat and tell people the truth. So feedback is very hard for them. And so, what happens is in in some organizations, we don't give honest feedback. We say, you're doing great. Keep it, you're doing great. Yeah, it's good, it's good, don't worry. And then you fire them. I mean, is that is that loving, you know, because they're not doing their job? We have to learn how to give honest feedback that doesn't hurt that doesn't, you know, crush someone, but yet we think we need to tell the truth. When someone needs help and guidance, we have to we have and that's an art, but its millennials have a hard time with it.

Chris Comeaux: 11:04

Yeah, the love the adage is clear is kind.

Karen McCullough: 11:08

Um, Brene' Brown.

Chris Comeaux: 11:10

Yeah, clear is kind feels very important. But then also these multiple generations, there's so much potential synergy. Like there's synergy, potential in the diversity, but yet we have to practice that clearness to be able to have that kindness. It's an

interesting way to kind of weave all that together. This is getting even more interesting by the day, right? So now we're navigating AI, artificial intelligence, automation, rapid digital change at the same time. And then our younger workers are asking for more humanity, flexibility, mental health awareness. It's like, ah, how do leaders avoid becoming more efficient and less human and all this interesting kind of tug of war and push and pull that we're living right now? I don't know. I don't know. Dude, I love I love how honest you are.

Karen McCullough: 12:00

Well, because I mean, I wish I knew even the even the Pope's in on this right now. I mean, everybody's everybody's got an opinion on this. You know, you you listen to uh Elon Musk, and we're not gonna work anymore. You know, his AI is gonna take over. And then I yeah, it's a lot. The speakers that are getting booked the most right now speak unburned out. Why? It's a lot. What we have to do is take a breath. We have to sometimes this is I think we're in a place right now where we just have to understand that that the world is is crazy and it's changing. And we have to we have to learn AI. You have to begin to know it. You you really do, and and it's so darn efficient. I mean, it can really help in so many ways. But I'm gonna go back to this whole whole idea of the human connection. I'm gonna I can't I'm a speaker when when COVID hit and I had to talk into this mic and into this camera, it was hard. It was hard to not get any sort of feedback. And I I've been doing it now what it's 2026, it's a long time, five years we've been doing it. People will definitely do this, but they would prefer live. So would I, because when I'm doing a live presentation, I see the energy, the excitement, I see the interaction. People are talking, there's a buzz, the energy in the room goes up, there's connection. I believe that we can't get rid of it. I so I I'm just what I what I'm observing is people need people. We need the human piece of it. So, when we can be human at work, be human. When we can say, keep your cameras on. I don't mind if your cat's walking in front. We want to learn about your cat. When your cameras are on, we can begin to learn more about you because we're not with you. We've got to begin to think of ways of helping people stay human, of helping us be vulnerable, of helping us embrace ourselves with our flaws, so to speak, and be open to feedback. There's these are the human qualities that AI will not, you know, it it will help us, but it's not going to take over. So just as a speaker, I can tell you there's a huge difference between being in front of people and doing it through the camera. So, when we have to use the camera, how can we help make it more human? I have a story, I don't know if I shared it with you, but uh my daughter will kill me, but I'm gonna share it. My Gen X daughter is in charge, and she's the only, I think, Gen X on her team, and she's got quite a few, and it's an international team. And she has um, I think.

Chris Comeaux: 14:38

Are they older or younger, Karen? Or are they all older or younger than her?

Karen McCullough: 14:42

Everyone's younger than her. Okay. You think they call her a boomer, and she's not, she's a gen young Gen X. But at the meetings, the younger, the the team wants to do the first 10 minutes, Let's Get to Know You. And it was about their pets. And she said they had three meetings, and when I got to the cats, she said, I came 10 minutes late. And she said, I started noticing that I was coming later and later. And I said, You can't do that. Right, you're taking that away. And she's laughing. She goes, I know, but it so she has to grow. She has to, so it's a two-way street. We can ask all of us have to adapt.

Chris Comeaux: 15:22

It's so cool that you said this. Uh today, where I was preparing for our podcast this morning, one of our team members texts me and he said, hey, Chris, Pope Leo's speech on artificial intelligence just seems so applicable to healthcare hospice. And so, here's what he actually texts me. This is actually from Pope Leo. In the era of artificial intelligence, when human dignity is threatened by new forms of dehumanization, ours is the pressing duty to remain profoundly human. We must lovingly safeguard the grandeur of humanity bestowed upon us and revealed in the fullness of Christ, the splendor of which no machine can ever replace. So, Karen, you know, the Pope backs you up there.

Karen McCullough: 16:04

Yeah. I mean, yes. I don't know where it will be. I won't, you know, I won't see my grand. I don't know. I think about what will the future be like. We don't know. We don't know.

Chris Comeaux: 16:14

Yeah, that's the amazing thing. Even the people that are shaping the future are like, we're not sure where this ends, but the hope that I get in what you just said is, you know, one of my favorite quotes is the best way to predict the future is to create it. So yet don't let the artificial intelligence kind of tailwag the dog. Um, it almost may feel commonsensical to go, we've got to keep the humanity in play. We've been saying lately, not to replace the humans, to augment the humans. In other words, we're gonna apply it. That's gonna help us do even more amazing things, not to replace the humans. And we've been absolutely true to that word. And as a CEO, I'm gonna keep fighting for that. Now, our team may serve two or three times the number of organizations because of the way we could apply tech. And so that's great because we could touch more people from a purpose standpoint. And by the way, the work that we do is so unique. I'm not sure there are enough unicorns out there that we could even

scale our team. So maybe the AI is going to be necessary, but it's not again to replace. It's a both and the other thing you remind me of, Karen, I actually had uh Daniel Pink on a podcast last year. He wrote a book in the Bush administration called The Whole New Mind. And it's a framework that he was predicting during the Bush administration that the advent of artificial intelligence is gonna really people are gonna struggle with to go, well, where's my value? And has this beautiful framework, things like storytelling, symphony, design, like these are the superpowers of the future. I think he nailed it and he nailed it way ahead of his time. It's almost like he was a prophet.

Karen McCullough: 17:47

Oh, that Dan Pink. Yep.

Chris Comeaux: 17:49

Yeah, he's good.

Karen McCullough: 17:51

You know, it's interesting. Um, when we talk about this, I have a funny AI. Um, I'm I'm from Ohio, but I'm from Cleveland, so we always say we're kind of like New York because it's, you know, and I brought that Cleveland attitude with me to Texas. And I've been kind of told I'm bold and abrupt, and but you know, because I don't say bless your little heart. But um I started using AI when I was getting these challenges, these emails, or something I had a problem I had to solve, and I would have just solved it like but AI has made me kind. It's so interesting how it has totally tempered me down into making me kind. I'm getting a lot more responses that are positive. I'm getting a lot more help than I ever would have gotten before. So, in a way, it's kind of shown me that I probably needed to soften and it's kind of done it for me.

Chris Comeaux: 18:47

Cool. And and but it's you're not copying and pasting. What I'm hearing you also say is you're learning in the process.

Karen McCullough: 18:53

It's actually rubbing off on you, which is rubbing off on me because I'm learning. Oh, if I would have just, I just had a challenge with a client and AI made its work, but it didn't give up. It just helped me and I began to see, okay, if I could shift a little bit, maybe I could get more. Anyway, it's just a positive from AI.

Karen McCullough: 19:12

Yep.

Chris Comeaux: 19:13

Well, if you could give one piece of advice to a leader trying to build a truly intergenerational workplace culture, especially in a high stress field like hospice or healthcare, what would your recommendations be?

Karen McCullough: 19:26

Adapt, listen, try to understand the person, pick the ones, pick, not everybody's going to be a winner. Pick those that you want to invest in, give them time. Understand all of this, and then choose a few people that you see and see how it works by putting this in. There's a company here in Houston that is he this almost all Gen Z with a few um, I think Gen X and millennial leaders. And what I watch them do is they listen, they try to understand. And they've even brought in a friend of mine who works there who she calls herself the therapist. Um, I think she's HR, but she says they come in and I give therapy. She said she's being funny because the younger generation is much more expressive of how they're feeling, how work is making them feeling how they're not feeling like they're achieving or they're being heard. And so she's guiding them. If you have that talent, honor it. Some of us are going to be better at coaching than others. And I believe that there's a place for us. I think we have to carve out where we fit into the culture by what we bring into it. So listen, the ideas, and then for Gen Z, if you're listening, don't try to make the changes the right away. I you're going to come in and see processes that could be changed, and you're going to see things that are in your mind could just make things better right away. But nobody wants to hear that the first week you're there, the first month you're there. You know, you've got to give it time. You've got to earn the trust when we can start to make these changes that are happening. All we're talking about is human to human. That's what's so interesting about AI and what I'm talking about. Everything that I talk about with the generations is listening, understanding, acknowledging, appreciating, um, feedback. It's all about how we connect. And maybe when I started as a baby boomer, we didn't. Maybe we took all of that home with us and just kept it inside. And maybe that affected our children, our relationships. I don't know. But what I'm getting at is we're starting to identify how people work and how people take in work. And maybe we can be a positive part of that.

Chris Comeaux: 21:39

Oh, I just think you struck upon something huge, Karen. And I thought about this before, but I feel like at the plane just totally landed. We another great Texas lady, Jamie Goff. She's actually a PhD. She's a therapist doing coaching, and she actually was the leadership development director for Christus, healthcare out your way. But now she has her own kind of private. Coaching practice. And something she said in that podcast made it kind of stick with me is that, you know, when I look at the baby boomers and

then my generation, mental health was like, you don't want to talk about that, right? Like something wrong with you if you're going to go get, if you're going to go to therapy. Whereas the younger generations, it is very much, it's open and it's honest. The reality is we know whatever the multiple generations, the five or six gen that are alive right now, there's a funny Clint Black song, you will remember, wherever you go, there you are. Yes. We bring, we bring our stuff with us wherever we go. And if you don't work on that at some level, it's showing up at work. It's showing up at home. It's showing up in every aspect of your life. And maybe that is the what the most wonderful thing about the younger generations are bringing that mental and emotional health is a necessary part of life. No different than, you know, I'm I've been on a good health journey lately, eating well, taking good care of myself. That's kind of the norm now. Um, whereas like my parents that, you know, they still are not taking that good care. And they're kind of more mid-later baby boomers. Now health, health and fitness is normal. We talk about that, we don't tiptoe around it. But now mental health, I feel like, is, and maybe that's one of the beautiful blessings of these multiple generations in the workplace, is that that part's gonna become norm. I don't know if you want to comment on that. No, keep going. Well, well, yeah, no, just that just an aha, just listening to you to me, that also gives me hope. Well, I had a very practical question, and I was gonna give you final thoughts.

Chris Comeaux: 23:34

Why do meetings create such multiple generational tension?

Karen McCullough: 23:40

Because as far back as I can go, and we're going way back, meetings, many meetings are a waste of time. Why are we having the meeting? You know, many times the agenda isn't there. Uh there's just so many meetings. Why do we have meetings? So, I feel like no matter what your generation is, you feel that this meeting, not all meetings, but this meeting was a waste of time. It could have been handled in a what?

Chris Comeaux: 24:09

Yeah, probably an email or some asynchronous communication. Exactly.

Karen McCullough: 24:13

But why the question then is why do leaders have the meetings?

Chris Comeaux: 24:17

Yeah.

Karen McCullough: 24:18

And the reason is because they want to make sure that they've said it and that it's out there. So, there's this whole thing. When uh when I was president of my association, all I wanted to do is make sure everybody heard the important information that was getting out. I would say, please just say I got it to my emails. I know, I knew I did not know what anything. I was like this. Who's doing what? Where's and I feel that leaders feel that way, especially uh a a team leader. You know, nobody's answering me. So, it's we have meetings to make sure we feel good that we've at least done our part to get that information out. I like this idea of A secrets. I have a uh I work with a lot of speakers and we'll do we'll do videos and programs, and I just do a link so they can watch them anytime. Four or five people might be on the call. 25 people are watching the link because they want to watch it at their own time. So time is our currency. Yes, that's don't waste it with meetings. So, we have to really understand how to do a very good meeting. But because I speak on the generations, always make your meetings where people are getting to know each other. There's got to be a part of that meeting where we're connecting as humans, we're beginning to understand each other a little bit more.

Chris Comeaux: 25:35

That's well said. Well, Karen, I'll give you final thoughts.

Karen McCullough: 25:38

Don't put people in a box. This is my biggest thing with the generations. Don't assume because of your agenda, don't make assumptions about people. Don't label people because of their generation. It's easier. This is what people do. We roll our eyes, we say, I don't want, I'm a baby boomer. Don't roll your eyes. Expect me to be current, you know? I will give the same to you. So, I believe that we have to come in and then we have to realize that different isn't difficult. I may have a different way of doing something, but it doesn't mean that it's wrong. And so sometimes we look at things that are different and we say, oh, these are going to be difficult. Be open to things that are different, be open to learning. I think that this is the foundation of what we're talking about. We have a multi-generational workforce. We have multi-generational people. They come from all different backgrounds, all different ideas, all different parts of the world, and they're bringing their ideas into work. Before we kept them to ourselves. Now we're asking you to share. When we're asking you to share, then we have to receive it differently. Do you see what I mean? So, it's a two-way street. Have somebody's back. I mean, I can go on and on. Show people you value them, have their back. When someone knows that someone, especially their leader, especially someone they respect, has their back, we're going to see more critical thinking. We tell younger people that they they're not thinkers, that we they're not thinkers because critical thinkers because they're afraid of making a mistake. So, we have to begin to

understand that mistakes are part of growth, have someone's back. And then all of us, no matter what our generation is, have someone's back. You know, we talk a lot about burnout. Balance is not the enemy of burnout. So, we have to begin to understand that we need to have balance. We need to begin to understand why are so many organizations bringing people in to speak on burnout. Because there's something that is not happening at work. And I think that we have to begin to look at our culture, how we treat people, how we how we respect people, and um, how we have our meetings.

Chris Comeaux: 27:41

That's awesome, Karen. You know, this is what occurs to me just listening to you, because it almost feels paradoxical, but I think it's if you listen to the wisdom you're really saying, this is not about putting people in a box. It's a framework of helping you understand how these generations have shaped people. And the Stephen uh Covey quote that comes to me none of us see the world as it is, we see the world as we are. And so that ability to see through other people's eyes in these different generations is a gift, actually. And the more you can do that, you could create this beautiful culture where we truly are better together than we are individually. So, thank you for the work that you're doing. I love your passion. You rub off of me, you make me, we're like kind of we're like energy together, man. You get us together and like ideas start popping. So, thank you. I'm so glad that I got to share you.

Karen McCullough: 28:27

Thanks for having me.

Chris Comeaux: 28:28

Yeah, absolutely. Well, to our listeners, we really want to thank you. At the end of each episode, we always share a quote, a visual. The idea is to create a brain bookmark, a thought prodder about our podcast subject to further your learning and growth, and thereby your leadership. And we're hoping that it sticks like a brain tattoo. Please be sure to subscribe to our channel. We don't want you to miss an episode of TCN Talks / Anatomy of Leadership. You know, it's easy for us to rail against the world and be frustrated by things. Let's be the change that we wish to see in the world. So thanks for listening, TCN Talks / Anatomy of Leadership, and here's our Brain Bookmark to close today's show.

Jeff Haffner: 29:01

"This is not about putting people in a box, this is about better understanding how our generations have shaped us into the people we are." As Stephen Covey said, "none of us see the world as it is, but rather we see it as we are," by Chris Comeaux.

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