

TRANSCRIPT: From Zombies to Zealots: Cultivating Passion and Purpose in Healthcare Leadership | Part One

Cause And Purpose Opening

Melody King 0:00

Everything rises and falls in leadership. The ability to lead well is fueled by living your cause and purpose. This podcast will equip you with the tools to do just that. Live and lead with cause and purpose. And now, author of the book The Anatomy of Leadership, and our host, Chris Comeaux.

Meet The Guests And Why They're Here

Chris Comeaux 0:22

Hello and welcome. I'm so excited today. We have two special guests with us. We have Tasha Walsh, who's the CEO and Executive Director of Connections Plus Healthcare Plus Hospice. Welcome, Tasha. It's good to have you.

Tasha Walsh 0:34

Good to be here, Chris.

Chris Comeaux 0:35

And we also have Darelyn DJ Mitch, who's an author. She's a master coach, chief energy officer, which I love, the Pyramid Resource Group, Home of Healthcare Coaching Institute, and Team Advantage Team Coaching. Welcome, DJ. It's good to have you.

DJ Mitsch 0:50

It's great to be here, Chris, and always with my friend Tasha, who is one of our faculty members for the Healthcare Coaching Institute.

Chris Comeaux 0:58

Yeah, well, major kudos to Tasha because she reached out to me and she said, Chris, you got to know DJ. First off, we both live in North Carolina, which is super cool. And she said, you know, your passion for leadership and just for a multitude of reasons that are as our listeners are going to figure out today, we need to get to know each other. And I really

appreciated our connection. And I went back to Tasha and said, let's do a podcast together. So here we are.

Tasha Walsh 1:20

Yay.

Chris Comeaux 1:21

So let me go ahead and introduce both of you a little bit more in detail to our listeners. And I'll ask each of you my famous question we asked for these podcasts. So DJ Mitsch is a pioneer in the coaching profession, and that means that every true sense of that word. One of the early leaders who helped bring coaching into organizations around the world, first and for research on impact. She's a former executive in the broadcast industry. She co-founded the Pyramid Resource Group in 1994. She has spent more than 30 years advising and scaling coaching to Fortune 100 companies, healthcare systems, academic, medical centers, and for senior leaders navigating transformation. DJ served as the sixth global president of the International Coach Federation. She later founded Healthcare Coaching Institute, one of the first organizations dedicated to bringing accredited coaching training to healthcare leaders. Her work focuses on leadership development, culture change, well-being, emotional intelligence, and the human side of transformation. Today she continues to inspire leaders to create healthier organizations through the power of coaching conversations. So, DJ, I warned you I was going to ask you this, but what's your superpower?

[Superpowers And How They Lead](#)

DJ Mitsch 2:28

Yeah, my superpower is guiding people to give language to their emotions, to their wisdom centers, and I help them connect and call out what it's like to integrate fully their body, mind, and spirit so that they are in full alignment with the decisions they make and the way they lead.

Chris Comeaux 2:47

I love that answer. And now I every time I meet you, I'm just like, no wonder you and Tasha hit it off so well. Just that answer when I think of the beauty of our care and hospice, and it was one of the first that really tended human beings in that way. And I love your lexicon about wisdom centers. Um, fascinating. Love it. Thank you. Well, Tasha, let me read your bio. So, Tasha is an LCSW, a licensed clinical social worker. She's a professional certified coach and has been on the leading cusp of the health and wellness field for more than 35 years. She brings extensive experience on positive psychology,

organizational, professional development and innovation to her leadership in the healthcare arena, helping organizations develop a positive workplace culture while implementing best practices in their service line. For the past decade, Tasha serves as the CEO of Connections Plus, Healthcare Plus Hospice in the beautiful, and I added that part, Southern Shenandoah Valley, Appalachia region, as well as a faculty member for the Healthcare Coaching Institute. Tasha's career history includes serving as the chief learning officer for an international behavioral healthcare company, where she orchestrated the development of award-winning leadership development coaching program. And in this role, she was the key member for an innovative NIH-funded 10-year research practice partnership with Vanderbilt University, focused on measurement-based feedback interventions and integrated healthcare. And Tasha's fun time, downtime, she's found she has found making music, spending time with family, friends, watching the sun move over the mountains, or doing most anything outside. And believe me, she lives in a beautiful place in the country to do that. So, Tasha, what would you add? And um, what's your superpower? I told you I was gonna ask you that as well.

Tasha Walsh 4:26

Yeah, well, I though I've been and I've really been thinking about that uh question. And the way I want to answer it is that my superpower is balancing on the cusp and helping other people balance on the cusp. Um, and what I mean by that is balancing on the cusp of where we are now and where we want to be, whether that's as an organization, as an individual, um, but really being able to kind of lift ourselves above the the fray and the uh the mix and the mess, and take those moments to be able to take a step forward to what we're envisioning.

Chris Comeaux 5:08

That is so well said, Tasha. You remind me, one of my favorite podcasts is at My Let, one of the top ones in the country. And he says that I can't wait to meet myself five years from now or 10 years from now. That's the quote that just comes to me just listening to you. Um, it feels like the spirit by which you uh intend that word on the cusp. Does that feel accurate?

Tasha Walsh 5:27

Yeah. And I often will ask, ask people that I'm working with is what is your future self going to be happy about the decision you're about to make? You know, what what would your future self say? You know, yeah.

Chris Comeaux 5:38

That's awesome.

Tasha Walsh 5:39

That's great.

[Why Calling Turns Into Zombie Mode](#)

Chris Comeaux 5:40

All right, ladies. Well, let's dig in. And so, um, gosh, so much I want to ask you about. So every hospice professional starts with a calling. In fact, let me back up and add it this way. Um, Tasha, you know one of my mentors was Quint Studer and DJ, I think I'd mentioned that. And I think you know of Quint. And I had him on my podcast, I think it was uh spring of last year. And now he has like five, six, seven different businesses. He owns the baseball team in Pensacola. And I did ask him, hey, now that you have this whole flight, if you will, or just like uh a good sample size of different types of businesses, which business is the easiest? And he said, healthcare without. And I just the look on my face wanted to go, what? But he didn't miss a beat, said Chris. I saw the look on your face. He said, There is no calling and connection to purpose like healthcare. And I feel like, as a subset of that, there's probably none like hospice that is so connected to the actual cause and the purpose in this work that we do. So I say that to kind of set the table. So every hospice professional starts with a calling. And this kind of gets to DJ's books from Zombies to Zealots, but what causes someone who entered the work with passion to slowly become a zombie at work?

DJ Mitsch 6:54

Yeah. So I'll take that first, Tasha. And you know, as I thought about this question, it's it's clear and it's always been clear that what is celebrated grows. And in organizations that we've consulted or coached in, often what's celebrated is achieving the mandates for productivity and profitability. And the minute that becomes the focus away from the human beings who are actually producing those things, uh, then the result becomes one about uh transactions rather than the work that could be available to people to be transformational in the way they lift something. And I loved that Tasha said on the cusp of things, one of the things we teach teams to do and teach leaders to do is to look beyond where you are now into the space of what you imagine together. And I think the imagination gets thrown out uh in that space where a zombie culture exists. So, you know, where people say, you know, just trust me, here's what we're gonna do, here's the mandate. Pretty soon trust falls away, and and they say, This is what you say, but this is what you do. And there's a disconnect from me. And then they never say anything about it, they just follow along.

Tasha Walsh 8:17

What I would add is that it's so easy in the world of healthcare regulation and all of the quality metrics and all of the audits that happen to really disembodify or you know, from the heart of why we came into this work and why we're here every day and the purpose of what we're doing. And I think, you know, even if you think about the image of a zombie, right, is somebody just walking around without any mind or brain or thought or um true embodiment of what they are there to do. And so I think we end up uh experiencing um like just like little traumas um throughout the work that then impact

Productivity Worship And Lost Imagination

Tasha Walsh 9:05

our ability to be fully present with the people that we're here to serve. Um, and that disconnects us from the heart of why we come into this work and where that passion lives.

Chris Comeaux 9:15

Are there some early warning signs, like some lights on the dashboard that leaders could kind of be attuned to?

DJ Mitsch 9:21

Yes. Well, one of the things I love is to watch your language. I was standing beside one of our executive clients in the cafeteria one day watching his response. They had just merged five organizations into one and different badges for different people. And I saw how people just stayed away from each other, right? There was like this contagion in the space. And he looked at me and said, Well, look at those little knuckle draggers. Uh, you know, there was a name for the groups. Oh, those people are retired in place. And when that's one of the reasons I came up with the zombie thing, it was like, oh, retired in place knuckle draggers, you know, you're describing people who are disconnected, which I love, Tasha. You're bringing online. So I think the warning sign is to listen to the language first. And there's always two sets of language. There's the what is being articulated, and then there's the emotional current underneath that that nobody's naming that is the more real factor in your engagement and your culture.

Tasha Walsh 10:23

Yeah, I mean, I what just the same thing. We've got the Jedi mind thing, DJ and I. But I think the you know, the other thing is um how we are the language that we use as leaders as well in talking about what it is that we're asking people to do and what the new mandates are that we may or may not have any choices about. If it's something that Medicare says we have to do now, it's kind of like we've got to figure out how to do that.

But being able to um watch and listen for I'll give you a real example. Like some folks on my team here will talk about trying to introduce these new requirements that we'd rather not do them either, but they are requirements and they talk about pushback. And so the language of pushback, somebody's gonna push back. Well, what does that mean? And kind of as DJ was saying, going to the undercurrent of that. Well, what's under that pushback? Is it that they are afraid? Is it that they are concerned about what this may mean to their day-to-day? Is it that they're grieving the loss of being able to do something in a way that they were very comfortable with? Because that's the way they've done it for five years. Um, so really listening to the language that um that we are using both ourselves too, and making sure that as a leader, that I'm using language that is going to empower and clarify rather than just demand or push down.

Chris Comeaux 11:58

That was so good. I DJ, the first time you and I met, I shared with you my mentor was Stephen Covey's mentor, a guy named Dr. Lee Thayer, and he won a lifetime achievement award in communication. And he would say that we create the worlds that we exist in based on the words that we use. And just a little bit of time I spent around you, I could tell you very much subscribe to that. Um, and it's interesting because he taught me as a consultant and as a coach to go into an organization and just listen to the words that people use because it tells you a lot about the worlds that they've kind of created for themselves. And you know, we always think in terms of pictures. And so

Early Warning Signs In Leader Language

Chris Comeaux 12:35

the movie metaphor I use quite frequently is the Leonardo DiCaprio movie movie Inception, where they were dreaming these worlds in the dream state. This is it's a good metaphor, right?

DJ Mitsch 12:45

And people are back, yes, and falling back, Chris, from one frame into the next frame into the next frame, right? There was so much in that movie that probably most of these folks have seen that uh you could play with in this metaphor, right? Because it is um it's never what it seems on the surface.

Chris Comeaux 13:05

Oh, that is so good. You just took it. I've never actually done it, taken it to that level of description, but you just nailed it. I totally agree. Well, well, we just jumped in and it did that on purpose. I'm gonna back up just for a second. So, DJ, your book is titled From

Zombies to Zealot. So, what exactly? So we kind of poked on what's a zombie. And it's funny because I'll use the term, are they on screensaver mode? Which I imagine zombie, you know, we hate whenever that computer pops on screensaver. So, what exactly is a zealot and why is that the kind of employee every healthcare organization should hope to develop?

DJ Mitsch 13:39

Yeah, so I don't, it's not mystery meat for one thing. Uh a zealot is it this came from zealing out, right? When I was working with this group of change agents led by this guy who was standing next to me in that cafeteria, I began to look at, well, if they're zombie, what would have them bring bring themselves fully into the work or into the zeal? And a zealot is simply someone who's found a way of staying connected to their purpose uh long after the things around them unravel and they will, long after the changes from mergers bring different enculturations together, long after the boss above them leaves, that they find a way to stay in their purpose connected. And they're reminded every day that they belong to something that is bigger than they are. So in giving language to this and the work that I'm doing on the next book is it's a meta-relational field. It is the field that exists as we talk about the universe a lot in coaching, right? And it's like the well, in the universe, blah, blah, blah. I think we have to define that. The universe is simply a flow of energy and information that is available to all of us. It's an energetic connection. And the field that we play in on this planet and in the planet alignment with everything else, right? Is meta-relational. You have to begin to look at how my work impacts other work, my words impact other people's work. So people who are creating the conditions for people to bring their best selves begin to look at the meta-relational field. How is this connected? What are the connective tissues? What are the things that we haven't given language to before that we really want to pay attention to? And particularly at this time in our history, we are dealing with chaos and change at the speed we've never seen, even though I was being interviewed on another podcast this week, and it was 2016, the last time I wrote an article on chaos for this magazine. I just did another one, an interview by Beyond the Page kind of podcaster. And I said, you know, 10 years ago we looked at chaos and the edge of complexity, and we looked at what to do in a space of creating the what's next way out. Now we can't look at the what to do, what gets done in the space between. What we have to look at now is what how are we related? How are we contributing to the pain and the angst, the chaos, and how are we contributing to the way forward? How are we finding and holding our center in the middle of this meta-relational field and accessing the energy of the universe in a different way? And it's up to us. This is what we signed up for in my belief system. We came for this specific time in human history. I could go on and on about that. I want to hear what everybody else has to say, but I will tell you, you know, I I was I traveled to Colorado last week and went to, you know, we're just going out to play, and there was no water in the reservoirs for Frisco and

Dylan going into the mountains, and there was no water. I mean, the water's drying up everywhere. Great Salt Lake's drying up. And I began to look at that and go, I don't think I signed up for no hot showers. What is this about? Right. But I think we have to look at again how is everything related? What is this picture of lack and how is it showing up not only in our environments, but in the way we approach each other and how we regard all life? And that's a bigger conversation.

What A Zealot Looks Like At Work

Chris Comeaux 17:15

Tasha, what would you add?

Tasha Walsh 17:17

I think that the zealot being that person that is able to stay in touch with their passion and their purpose is really the key to good teamwork and um good um connection, as DJ was saying. I mean, I I totally agree with that perspective of that we are all connected and really being able to look at how we, how, how I as a leader am treating and approaching and being present for the people that I am supervising or that I am managing or that I am leading is going to impact how they are able to be present for the people that they are serving. So it's kind of like that paying it forward, you know, and if their, if their energy is be is drying up, how do I go upstream to the to the to the mountains to, so to speak, you know, to to look at, okay, is the is something blocking the water flow that should be able to be feeding these people downstream? Um, is there something that I need to do for myself that as a leader I can provide um some reinforcement to the reservoir that should be able to be being paid forward so that they can go and take care of the people that they're there to take care of? I think that um, you know, it's so easy for us in today's world to lose that connection with each other and lose that connection to the world that we are living in and that we are a part of, um, that that is what I think needs to be strengthened in order to maintain that zealot attitude and that um commitment to purpose and um and that realization for ourselves and those around us that um that there is no separation really, that you know, we are all a part of each other. I exist because you exist, we are here together, and none of us would be here without each other, um, right? And and um being able to recognize that interbeing, if you will, um, you know, that the person that I'm here to serve who is is dying of of um lung disease or something is just as valuable as any one of us sitting here and talking on this podcast. And how do we respect that, value that, bring that in, help them bring to the forefront their best self in the moment? Um, and and remember, even if it's just momentarily um in a in an interaction as they're passing

through out of this life, you know, what is it that they have been passionate about and what is what has been their purpose? Because everybody has one.

Chris Comeaux 20:38

DJ, I didn't ask you this when we first met, but do you happen to know John Gordon and his work with the energy bus out of curiosity?

DJ Mitsch 20:45

Um I know of John.

Chris Comeaux 20:48

Okay.

DJ Mitsch 20:48

Yeah.

Chris Comeaux 20:49

Um, we've we've used him quite a bit or use his book quite a bit. Actually, we're gonna have his daughter Jade is actually doing a presentation for our TSAN network. And we've been very successful using that um as a way to just talk about energy in this work that we do. Nice. And I have a another friend who went and studied at the Human Performance Institute in Orlando. You may know of that, DJ. And so they teach high performance athletes, right? And they finally figured out hey, healthcare leaders need to perform at a high level too, and how athletes could could perform at peak performance, but then how do you bring all that wisdom into the workplace? Because, and for me, it was so good to interact with my friend around this and what he was learning because it was just making me more cognizant of I am a naturally high energy person. Well, what do I do to kind of basically feed my energy factory on a day to day basis? And then also, how do you wax and wane and kind of turn up your energy throughout the day? I'm not sure if that resonates with both of you, but there's one question I wanted to put along that you guys could comment. Because I was also reflecting how do you distinguish healthy

[Connection, Interbeing, And Hospice Purpose](#)

Chris Comeaux 21:55

passion from unhealthy work workaholism? I love what I do. I've probably skirted the line between workaholism and passion. And so if you guys could maybe any one of you just

speaking to that challenge of how we manage energy and that balance between passion and workaholicism.

DJ Mitsch 22:12

Well, I love the oh god, Dr. Jim Corporate Athlete was the original Institute for High Performance.

Chris Comeaux 22:19

Yeah, Lauer, I think was his last yes.

DJ Mitsch 22:21

And um, and so we actually integrated into his work in GSK Pharmaceuticals, which was based here in RTP, North Carolina. And um so I I get it. And one of the things that I adopted from all the work that we did around that was to look at the energy, not only the energy for performance, but what gives us energy and what drains it. And you know, just um having people become aware of that, right? Find the right language, as I said, my magic, my superpower is helping them find right language for those things, right? What does it mean to energize a work group, a team, an organization? And it's really about winning the hearts and minds of people. But I will say I'm gonna back up and answer the last part of your question, which was the workaholicism. There are things I'd like to take out of the language of corporations, and one of them is that is that um you know, when you start diagnosing things in the energy, I hear a lot of people talk about that leader is a toxic leader. Take that out of your vocabulary because you're feeding that, you're energetically feeding that there is such a thing as toxic leadership. Take it out of your conversation that um I'm a workaholic or that person is a workaholic. Stop with the labels because people who are in their zeal when they're working are in their creative spirit. And when you're in your creative spirit, there are no time limits on that. You do what you do as a contribution and legacy. And I think we're all feeling amped up to the point of what is my contribution today? What is my signature and how will my work matter? Most of us are beginning to feel irrelevant. And I love what Bruce Springsteen said in a recent interview that he was just a link in the chain between the great artists that came before him and all those who would come after him that would be influenced by his work. And if we can see ourselves as this magical link in the chain, along with the other magical links in the chain, and that without us, you know, critical pieces fall away. We may lose something bigger than the conversation we're in when we limit it to judgment.

Chris Comeaux 24:45

Tasha, is there anything you want to add to that? Because I want to ask you specifically about the how you've brought her work, but anything you want to add?

Tasha Walsh 24:52

Yeah, no, she the last thing she said, judgment, that's what I would have added.

Chris Comeaux 24:57

Perfect. Well, Tasha.

Tasha Walsh 24:58

Don't to not don't do the judgment thing.

Chris Comeaux 25:00

Don't do the judgment thing. Stop it.

Tasha Walsh 25:03

Stop it.

Chris Comeaux 25:04

So, Tasha, you've brought DJ's work into Connections Plus Hospice. What made you believe this wasn't just another

[Energy, Passion, And Dropping Labels](#)

Chris Comeaux 25:10

leadership book, but something that um aligned with you? Because my sense is this aligns with you quite well in maybe some of your worldviews and your leadership philosophy, but maybe I'm I might be judging that incorrectly.

Tasha Walsh 25:25

No, no, you're spot on. That's a that's a very uh um accurate assessment. And I think that um, you know, burnout is real in healthcare, and it is really a problem. Um, I think we all know that. And there's so many, you know, there's so many um efforts and books and webinars on, you know, workforce development and how do you uh how do we solve the workforce issues and um how do we attract and hire and retain good staff and um the workforce shortages and things like that. And I'm I'm a firm believer that a big part of what is happening specifically in healthcare, but you could you could apply this to other industries as well, um, is first off, the language there, right? Healthcare as an industry. It's it should not be an industry. Healthcare is a, you know, healthcare is a service. It is people who go into healthcare as work are service providers. There is that calling. So to even treat it or even call it an industry is a huge disservice and can be very deflating. Because what that implies then is that all the people in the industry are part of some little machine that's

just kind of going along and just kind of checking off the productivity numbers and checking off all of the um benchmarks or checking off all of the compliance requirements. Um, and that's what creates zombies. Um, that's what creates the problem in healthcare, I think. Um, and that's where people start feeling burned out and they start questioning why am I here? Why am I showing up every day? You know, I love my patients, but I can't stand all this other stuff. And and at some point in time, it's like the love for patient, you know, the all the other stuff may outweigh the love for patients and force people out of the work. Um, and so I really believe in what the book talks about in terms of really helping people get in touch, not just get in touch with their purpose, but live into their purpose and bring their purpose into their everyday and being able to do that in a in an environment and an and building an organization that really supports that as best, as best we can. Um, and it's not easy. It's not easy being a leader in healthcare these days because you do have all of that other stuff. And, you know, Medicare is always throwing out these new things that, well, now you got to do this. And, you know, in hospice, now we have this level of assessment and we have these audits coming in. So all of that is real. And at the same time, there are people reaching out to us that need our care, and they need the love and compassion that the folks that come that get attracted to this and really I think they start out at zealots at as zealots, and then there's a risk of becoming zombified. So it's how as leaders and how as organizations can we kind of create the systems and the structures to to reduce the zombies and and be able to, you know, uh give them the antidote so that they can become the zealots. So it really does align with uh with what I see in in the work that we do every day.

Chris Comeaux 28:54

Listening to you, Tasha, you reminded me. So we um we did research, we came up with the conclusion there are eight challenges facing every hospice and powdered care organization. And then we launched future councils in 2025 to unpack the challenge and come up with solutions. One of the ones that surprised me the most was the compliance regulatory. Surprised the most from this perspective. Um, there's something about the regulatory area that's more disempowering than all the others. And one of the analogies they came up with is yes, every game has rules, but what game can you win the national championship? And two years later they come back and say, you know what? We're actually now interpreting the rule differently, so we're gonna take that back from you. And it was a pretty good analogy of going, yeah, that's why this one feels different. But then the question left hanging is that's so potentially disempowering. And so I love what you're saying. And so what surprised you the most about bringing in DJ's work? And did it help, is it helping rectify that we're quandary around the

Using Coaching To Fight Burnout

Chris Comeaux 29:55

regulatory? It just feels, I guess, a little bit more disempowering, maybe compared to some other challenges.

Tasha Walsh 30:00

Yeah, well, and that's that's really insightful because I think the other part of that is it's so outside of our control. Um, you know, and when you think about empowerment, part of that is having some sort of sense of control, right? And so, you know, the regulatory changes is we can we can vote in certain ways based on what we what we hear people saying. But even even if we vote for like all the people that are saying exactly what we want them to say about healthcare, it's gonna take time for anything to change, right? So, so that's another piece to it, I think. But um to answer your question, I think some of the surprising um some of the surprises to me is that sadly, I think there are some uh situations where people's experiences um are so zombifying, if that's not a word, but um they but they become so entrenched in in being a zombie that they don't see a way out. Um and they they stop looking. And um even if you're like shining a light like right in front of their face, they just can't see it. Um and and that that is that's very sad and hard um to work with when you're when you're working with you know with really good professional people that have caring hearts, but they are just to the point where they're um, you know, and I'm not saying that they're beyond being able to become zealots, but they are but they are so deep in the zombie world that it is just as an organization and as a leader, it comes, it becomes really, really hard to kind of help help them see the antidote and take the antidote. Um, what the other thing though, that on the other side is that it's also um surprising to how quickly people can respond um positively because that that you know, and again, that's that's the flip side of that, because most of the folks that um that that I work with and that I have seen kind of be introduced to parts of what we're talking about, you know, they they respond really quickly and they take it in and they sit up straighter and they're like, yeah, you're right. And they remember what the mission is and they're all hands in, you know. And so that I think is also really surprising is how quickly it can be impactful, um, which

What Surprised Tasha And Part Two

Tasha Walsh 32:45

is fantastic because Lord knows healthcare needs it.

Chris Comeaux 32:49

You absolutely need it.

Jeff Haffner 32:50

Don't miss part two of this episode coming this Friday.