

Episode 7 – Emotion at Work in Vulnerability and Leadership Chatting with Khurshed Denugara and Claire Genkai-Breeze

Phil: Hello there fair podcast listener and thank you for downloading this episode of the Emotion at Work podcast. Before today's episode begins I just wanted to do a bit of an introduction and set some context. So we have two guests on the podcast with us this week, we have Khurshed Denugara and Claire Genkai-Breeze and they are from an organisation called Relume and you can find them online at relume.co.uk and we have a very fascinating deep and wide-ranging conversation, we talk about leadership, we talk about some of the traits and aspects that are important around modern day leadership and for modern leaders, we also talk about what are the near enemies of some of these traits or some of these attributes that are needed from a leadership point of view and then we also get into some specifics and tangible details around what hints, tips, and guidance or advice can we give to leaders or to people working with leaders to help them really think about the idea of vulnerability of identity and of effective leadership in the workplace. I think this is the first podcast recording that I have done that I got wholly lost in the conversation, so I almost forgot my role as host and interviewer and just got fully embedded and lost in the conversation, and I have listened to this conversation three times now; once when I was there and present and taking part and twice as I have listened back to it since then and there is content in it that still intrigues, surprises, and challenges my thinking. We recorded this, the three of us sat in a room, it's a bit echoey at times - there wasn't much padding so the acoustics weren't amazing but they are not bad either, so sit back, relax, pay some attention, and enjoy because it is a good one. Here we go.

Hello and welcome to today's episode of the Emotion at Work podcast and today we are talking about emotion at work within individuals when they are challenging perceived wisdom or customs and practice and in a first, for the podcast, we have got two guests with us today and our guests are practitioners, authors, and deep thinkers as well, there is a couple of books that we will come into once we go but one of the books that really peaked my attention was *Floored but Willing*, so it openly accepts that I am fallible but I want to do my best and so someone who is starting their podcast journey and making mistakes but doing my best all the same. I am really excited to have our two guests today, so we have Khurshed and Claire, so welcome both to the Emotion at Work podcast.

Khurshed: Thank you.

Claire: Thank you.

Phil: I am really curious about this idea of *floored but willing*, so let's start there if we can. Tell me a bit more about that.

Claire: The idea actually, wasn't the idea coined by the chap who set up the Eden Project?

Khurshed: Yes, Tim Schmitt.

Claire: And he described some work that we had done in the first book that we wrote together as a bible for the *Floored but Willing* and it was a great phrase and it really got us to think about, well it's just a fantastic thing isn't it? To know we are *floored*, to accept that you are, to not need to hide it and then that notion of willingness to be willing to go forward despite it, willing to put yourself out there, willing to lead, willing to try, willing to experiment and it struck me at the time that willingness is a massively underrated idea in human behaviour. The courage that is associated with that is fantastic.

Khurshed: And he was particularly coming at the world from the aspect of someone who had had a very significant ambition, something that was routed in initially a piece of hope and imagination that then overtime was manifested in a form that no-one would have drawn a linear line to where they'd started and where we'd started and so it was particularly encouraging for us particularly as what he was referring to was our first venture into writing a book that someone who had stood for something, a piece of ambition, a piece of hope, had manifested in against the odds at a lot of times, had become a kind of poster child, an innovative form of leadership that we weren't used to. This was almost a decade ago now. Had got so much stimulation and inspiration from what we were writing about and he was the person who encouraged us then to turn our minds to this attention of what is it that constitutes that type of individual, what are they made up of and what are some of the capabilities and strengths and character attributes that they would bring to their work. Where it particularly landed in the corporate sphere is, of course, the traditional corporate sphere that we typically work at the senior levels that we typically work at, until relatively recently to be flawed was not something that you would ever put your hand up to. The potential for blame and diminishment and some kind of fantasy that your career would be slowed or stopped or that you would be ejected from the business because of your flaws and because of your mistakes was and still is to a large extent, very prominent and yet we knew from the work that we had done that if you did not tell the story with hindsight but you told a story as you were going along that most of the really substantial achievements and transformations in large corporate complex global businesses came about through individuals who are willing to put their flaws front and centre and encourage the team they were working with to similarly put their flaws front and centre and to work through them rather than avoid them. That's what we got really intrigued by and we were very intrigued by how that seem to somehow bound a team and a business together rather than cause it to fragment, how it seemed to accelerate success rather than decelerate it, how it seemed to be the life blood of individuals being more and more successful rather than less and less successful and so it felt like there was a private story about how your flaws could underpin your success that was not being told and instead what was told was this public story that was very easy to tell in hindsight which is typically elegant and smooth and perfect, like we have these heroic leaders who knew what they were doing all along, whereas actually the people that we have been exposed to who have achieved heroic things would often say to you in private they didn't have a clue while they were going along and there were plenty of moments of iteration and failure and experimentation and prototyping and testing and adjusting and that's not an easy story to tell but that's the one we wanted to try and get into.

Claire: I'm sorry, I'm just worried about that reflect, there is a middle solution on this that we have frequently seen in our big courts, which is where people have learned behaviour about being able to describe their weaknesses.

Phil: So almost in like an inauthentic...

Claire: Yeah, so it's like a learned protocol for being able to appear to be comfortable with describing weaknesses and so I witnessed a few years ago a stellar example of that where a new leader coming into the team put down on the table in front of the team at the first team meeting every single piece of 360 feedback and psychometrics testing he had ever received, laid it on a table in a pile and basically said okay if you want to know about me you need to read that and that was not what you're describing, that's something else, what that is is playing the corporate game really really well appearing to be able to work with the feedback but it was almost used as a kind of defensive structure to say know me, know what I'm not good at, know what my flaws are and then do as I say and it subsequently turned out to be that way. There is a wide gulf actually between what you are describing Khurshed and what people default to in organisational terms which is not the



conversation of intimacy and vulnerability and working in it at the moment, it's the conversation of declaring my strengths or declaring my weaknesses in a structured format almost as though this is who I am get over it. It is using authority overlaid on to strengths and weaknesses and I think that is much more common than we give it credit for. There is a sense of what Khurshed is describing has aliveness in it and possibility in it and intimacy and relationship and being on the edge of what's known and an excitement about it like a community, this other thing is a protocol, it's a habit, it's a structure, it's a deadening experience.

Phil: That's driven a couple of thoughts for me. So one is almost the physical removal of stuff and process by almost putting the pieces of paper on the table and saying this is me if you want to know me read these, for me that smacked of application of ownership because I am not owning that information and doing something with it I am putting it there for you to consume in whatever way you do. The way that it was done interested me but also I think there is the, I don't know how to articulate it well - so when I think about the work that Benny Brown does, she does her own vulnerability and then the consequential work that she has done into shame to what extent does that encourage people to be vulnerable in a genuine authentic way or has that encouraged people to say oh I should do vulnerability, I must make sure I am a leader I must do vulnerability.

Khurshed: And there is increasing rhetoric around that. We used the concept that came from Ucare originally from Buddhist space thinking in the first book called The Meer Enemy and so we had a number of distinctions in the first book about what it takes to challenge the status quo and for each of those distinctions, we also talked about what the mere enemy of that is. Do you want to say a little bit about what the mere enemy is rooted in for the moment because that might help with this question?

Claire: So the idea is that you set out to cause something or you set out to become something and through your practice, you end up in a particular place. You think you've arrived at where you wanted to be but you are a thousand miles away from it and in Buddhist terms, the easiest one to look at is Buddhist Practice Equanimity the idea in that in the face of a lot of difficulties having an equanimous approach but the practice of that, the near enemy of that is indifference. It may look the same at a cursory glance at someone being able to be really, really, equanimous in the face of difficulty but the slide away from that is just experiencing indifference towards what's happening. So what you were describing when we were talking about it earlier was almost like using self-awareness as a commodity, so I think in the book we describe the near enemy of self-awareness is self-labelling so it's that idea of data as self because the conversation that you were describing Khurshed when we have seen people engaged in that work, what we see and what we experience is a vibration, people vibrate because what they are saying is new to them, what they are disclosing feels fresh to them and they are not quite certain where it is going to go which is completely different from slapping a bunch of 360 down.

Phil: Would you mind just expanding on equanimity, would you mind just expanding on that a little bit more? It's not a word I am familiar with.

Claire: The idea of equanimity is the stability to in the face of stimulation difficultly, things that might activate you, instead of being caught up in this and then caught up in the next thing and caught up in the next thing or strongly rejecting something or strongly attaching to something, being able to be very intimate, very intimate with what's going on and at the same time not caught up in it, so it's a spacious quality of present without being under attached or avoidant to certain things and over attached to others. It is not a bad leadership quality actually.



Phil: Okay, and then the near only you said is then is indifference. You have got caring about it with an element of distance and just not caring about it.

Claire: There you go, well said Zen master.

Khurshed: So if we apply that back to the area we were just in around what it means to work with your flaws then potentially the near enemy of vulnerability is a lack of responsibility of some form I guess, I haven't got a very precise wording for it, but I often see the near enemy of vulnerability along the lines that Claire has described. It's an act.

Claire: It's a well-rehearsed act, it's like what you said about yourself being somewhere else, and it's a bit like being behind yourself, not really fully present.

Khurshed: And you know it when you are on the receiving end of it if you are familiar with what's going on internally, the semantic reaction is at best a kind of neutrality, you know something didn't quite land on me, at worst I sometimes find myself quite repulsed by it. Like there is something else going on that I can't quite get access to but because it's being wrapped up in this near enemy and vulnerability I feel even more nauseous around it because it's not just a difficult thing it's a difficult thing wrapped up in this virtuous thing and that makes it quite difficult to be on the receiving end. So that supple edge between what we are working with and what the near enemy is is important for people to be able to distinguish for people doing this work.

Phil: It reminds me a little bit of a conversation I was having with the supervisor I did my masters with and were talking recently about performance and how people perform emotion, so how people do emotion. Emotion is often seen as something that passively happens to us if you click a [indescribable 00:16:16] response time approach but actually some people will perform emotionally, will do emotion in a particular way and it could be as almost inconsequential as feign surprise when you get given a present and you already know what it is, so on father's day I got given three gifts by my children one of which was a t-shirt but my son had already shown my aforementioned t-shirt but I wasn't supposed to know that I knew, my son is only four so he didn't know what he had done really, but to my other children who are ten and seven collectively they wanted it to be a surprise so there was a need for me to perform that surprise to which my wife winked at me when she saw me do it because she knew that it wasn't genuine but I could imagine that performance is something that leaders will do, it could be about performance in emotion but it could also be performance of oh I need to do some flaw acknowledgment now, this will be the time for flaw management, which flaw shall I acknowledge because I need to do that.

Khurshed: And one of the places you see that playout and this is not done maliciously or with deliberate intent, is post the vibrant real touching, moving, frightening experience of working with your flaws. Imagine a leader that is doing that work and in that process with their team, it's real in that moment but then what they imagine is that somehow that they can keep telling the story of that as a version of what really happened and of course every time they tell the story the more distant they become of what the actual experience was like. It's a kind of version of what happened with you, in the moment of the surprise being spoiled, you had a real experience and then subsequent to that every time you had to enact it and we find that a lot as well here, that the more distant that one gets from the original experience the harder it is to land it and of course what we want people to do is not tell the story of their experience but have another experience and another experience and another experience because the context, the environment, the world is changing around them all the time and therefore they have to keep working with that material, it is not enough to have, I think what happens in the old paradigm of going on a course, it's not enough going on a course, have an epiphany and then keep telling the story of that epiphany for another ten years

imaging that you are doing the real work, you are not, you are just telling the story of the work which is a very different way of operating. I don't know if I have communicated that clearly but we see a heck of a lot of that particularly in senior organisations, it's something that they become very reliant on to the extent that when you check in with the organisation around them they pretty much know the story that is going to be told, oh right yeah she will tell the story about that time, yeah I'm pretty sure that is coming up in this next piece and of course that just then breeds the very thing we don't want which is scepticism and distance and the true team of a leadership conversation like it says presentation the whole time which is not what we are after.

Phil: I get the sense that the relationships you have with your clients tend to be quite long in duration so when you see that epiphany moment somebody genuinely has one of those working with their flaws moments and then it gets regurgitated out what do you do to either work with the individual or challenge that? If I'm wearing my lesson shoes I think I relate to that, I see that my boss or my peers do that all the time, how do you go about challenging with that or working with that to get...

Khurshed: I think a key notion in our work is that it's never done disconnected from what's going on commercially inside the particular business we are working in and an immediate thought that comes to your question is that you return people to the current work at the time. If someone, for example, is talking about their flaws and vulnerability around how perfectionist they are and they trip into another story about that what we would generally and sometimes very firmly is to encourage them to stop the history lesson and to apply that insight to what is going on now. So what is going on now in your business, in your team, in your meeting, in this very moment, in this conversation that means you can apply that insight live to see whether it still has validity to your work or whether actually, it's just an old story you keep telling yourself because there may be something else that now needs to emerge that we need to meet or face into that is more relevant for now. So I think that returning to this current moment is the first thing that comes to mind.

Claire: People get addicted to epiphanies don't they, I mean absolutely addicted to the idea that learning only has validity if there is a peak moment or a strong emotion attached to it or a shift in awareness and actually not all organisational life is going to be like that on an ongoing basis but that doesn't mean that you can't be really intimately alive to your experience on a day to day basis it's just that it's not all going to be intensely dramatic. So sometimes we get what I would describe as dramatic insights and if they are not careful they assume that the next one has to look the same in terms of drama and so forth and so forth and what Khurshed is describing is about integrating it, normalising it into what is happening now. Your awareness can be an extraordinarily powerful thing about relatively small things and shift the way you feel or experience or do your work but it doesn't all have to be about dramatic epiphanies.

Phil: I feel compelled to share something that happened to me yesterday because from what you have just said I had an experience yesterday that makes me think about that as an example. There is something I have been struggling to do for a while, in almost a Brian Tracey time management where I needed to eat a frog yesterday, something that I really needed to do and I know I have been procrastinating about it for a while and I arrived at Kings Cross and my plan was to go to a co-working space that I use just around the corner and to go and do that and instead I remembered a while ago when I used to be doing tasks that I needed to complete I would walk up and down the footpath between my village at home and the next village and I would speak into my phone whilst I was doing it, so I would plug my earphones in and I would walk and talk and think about what it was I needed to do and I thought you know what I am going to go for a walk instead, I'm not going to go to the co-working space I am going to go for a walk instead. I walked down Euston Road into Regents Park and ended up stopping up near the zoo but by the time I had finished, there was a phone call

in-between, but by the time I got to the zoo it was done, granted it was in an audio file format but it was done and I guess it was another realisation for me that I had a strategy that I knew in my own experience worked for me when I am procrastinating, yet it has taken me however many days I have been procrastinating on that to remind myself what it needed to be, but that wasn't a big drama actually it was a good solid 20-25 minutes' worth of thinking and I didn't feel strange walking down London talking into my earphones because everybody does it walking down the street anyway. Would that be an example that would fit?

Claire: Yeah, it's about the willingness to notice something knocking on your door basically and it doesn't have to be a drama and the example that Khurshed was describing, I think, is that kind of ability to nest something in now rather than then is really really important so nesting things in now, whatever the now looks like is a terribly important leadership ability really and of course most of the work we do with people is in a social learning way as we tend to do things in teams or groups wherever we possibly can so that nowness often means other people will have an opinion about it now and there will be data coming into the conversation that other people might not be aware of. I am just wrestling with that question about how do we do it, unrelentingly might be a way to describe it, we just don't give up and then what we find is that a certain percentage of people are working in leadership roles and businesses pick up the muscle of being unrelenting about it because it's energising and it's enlivening and they make themselves and life interesting to themselves with less clear so they are prepared to go to more complex places, more ambiguous places, more frightening places often on their own.

Khurshed: It might be worth contextualising a little bit more about why we end up in this territory. So, our work is primarily with organisations and teams and individuals who have to, in order to be successful, destabilise, challenge, provoke the status quo as it currently exists. So that status quo might be in their market, it might be in their business, it might be in their team, it might be in themselves and at its best all those levels are being challenged at the same time, they nest within one another. The capacity to do that work is not something that our current and previous generation of leaders have taught themselves and been taught how to do because most of their work and credibility has come from essentially building asset-based businesses that they sell products off to others and it's a relatively mechanistic, I create something, I store something, I distribute something, I sell something, I engage with my clients around that kind of mode. You can get by with a fairly deliberate relatively slow highly analytical problem-solving type of mentality. The businesses that we are working with have come from that heritage but are now, to put a shorthand around it, realising something pretty fundamental needs to shift if they are going to be fit for the digital world that is upon us but the form of leadership that is needed for the digital world is quite distinctively different around pace, disturbance, agility, learning, improvisation, creativity, just the whole feel around a digital leader is completely different and yet what we are trying to do over and over again is to make someone rooted in a corporate past fit for a business of the future. When you go into that world and look to help people disturb the status quo it is highly anxiety provoking, that's not a bad thing because you can be highly anxious and safe, yes, so being highly anxious also brings with it emotions of fear and distrust and paranoia and anger and a general emotional destabilisation of some kind and the connection of all of that to the conversation you started with us about what it means to be flawed but willing, you cannot live in that environment if you are trying to be this highly controlled, highly perfect, image of strong stable leadership you want to project out into the organisation and the world and it is interesting that phrase came out of my mouth because what we have just experienced in this country is an absolute manifestation of how out of date that is. I am not making a political point, whatever your politics are that is a fundamentally outdated and flawed model of leadership that the electorate in this country saw through and did not like. I am not suggesting the alternatives were dramatically better but we know that was just not on key and so in order to come out of that we need to be comfortable with anxiety that stems from vulnerability

towards our flaws. That's where people tell you that they think you are being authentic I think it's because of something in that pot, something in that recipe, something in that mixture that lacks, we are inspired by people's imperfections, not their perfections. The desire that our current Prime Minister has had to somehow inspire us through this perfectly scripted and highly structured and defended image has not worked and doesn't work but if we could have just got access to some of what makes and made her human, which includes her flaws and her willingness and her imperfections then we may have said yes this is the person who we want to entrust the leadership of this country too and the same thing applies to organisational life, there are a whole host of leaders who are realising that they haven't got it anymore and they are being replaced but they are still being replaced unfortunately by another version of themselves just a bit younger and so that's our work primarily comes into play which is how are we going to shift this because something quite definitive is needed here and so it's that as an overarching context I'd set that triggers off a load of other capabilities but it's this particular one around working with your flaws and vulnerability that we have zoned in on. Does that make much sense?

Phil: It does, it does make sense. Claire is looking very ponderously out of the window.

Claire: I was reading some Heifetz yesterday, you know Ron Heifetz, it's a massive book I have never come across it before written a few years ago about the practices of adaptable leadership and in there he was describing something so much more succinctly than we can I think which the story that people conflate authority with leadership is. Authority meaning perfection, knowing, clarity, structure, a sense of control and leadership being in the moment, in the nowness, working with everything that is known, unknown or unclear and be willing to stay present to it all and other people in the process of trying to work out how to solve problems and I just thought it was a really, I think I photographed it actually, it was just a really beautiful piece of the book about that we continue to conflate those two things together and I think what you have just been describing Khurshed is an example of that actually. That leadership is an emotional process actually, leading yourself is an emotional process, leading others is an emotional process, we should care more about the workplace, we should care more about people in the workplace, we should care about what our businesses are about in our society and actually part of our work is often helping people to reconnect to what they do care about because they have been numbed out, they have just been completely numbed out.

Khurshed: I think this is an important part of it because we stand very strongly for discomfort as a part of organisational life but we don't stand for stress and I think there is a distinction between those things; so when you say numbed out that's what it triggers in my mind Claire is that we meet people who are repetitively and highly stressed at senior levels in organisations but mostly that is down to them trying to just do more of the very thing that is not working for them, so this turning the wheel form of leadership that we have been describing about. When we talk about discomfort and instability and disturbance those are the things that bring life into an organisation and to an individual without necessarily stressing them.

Phil: Yeah.

Khurshed: Because it gives us access to the creative and the novel and the things that give most of us the buzz and the energy and the desire to be at work. We are not troubled by that but we imagine all kinds of things will come as a consequence of being destabilised in that way and that's not our experience, our experience is it gives new life to an organisation and that is what we have to be about, we have to in our profession, in our work and in the work of our clients and if we don't manage that then the future for our large corporations is not great I don't think, they will be



challenged from all kinds of directions and won't be able to withstand that challenge and we see that already in a number of different forms, in the news almost daily.

Claire: When I think about flawed it's simply being incomplete. I mean when I think about the work we have done over the years I would say we are just as much flawed and willing as [indescribable: 00:34:06] practise aren't we?

Khurshed: Absolutely.

Claire: The reason we keep going back to it repetitively is that we care very deeply about it but we are constantly uncovering our limitations in the same way.

Khurshed: And the work to bring it to its very pragmatic, practical orientation is in itself a mess and we don't know when we start where it will finish and nowadays increasingly are providing clients with less and less of an agenda for the work we might do because we do not know but if we can contract at the start that this is going to be messy and inelegant and creative and that the end of it you will be dissatisfied and we will have made some kind of breakthrough that we wouldn't have got otherwise, if we can contract all of that at the beginning then we often end up in a good place or a good enough place but absolutely that then has to be modelled by ourselves. My ability to do this work is very highly rooted in my comfort with my own fallibility and my desire in the moment to call it, so if I have pushed someone too far or stroked a conversation for too long or not made enough sense of something, or inappropriately structured something, this is all part of the work and declaring it in the moment and asking for some help, trying to recover it and showing how quick recovery is possible that's all part of this work, so we cannot look or be perfect ourselves in the face of what we are asking of our clients. If we are really going to roll our sleeves up and be in the work with them it means also begging for quite a bit of forgiveness when we screw up ourselves and we do.

Phil: You hinted at it a little bit there so when that happens how do you go about sharing that, I am curious about how you do that? In that moment when you think you have pushed the conversation too far or you've held something for too long or you've explained something poorly how do you say...

Claire: Just that, just that.

Phil: Okay.

Claire: Just that really. I suppose our work is not about wrong, being un-wrong. So we are not enrolled into a particular thing of consultant and teacher or trainer or facilitator, we don't consider ourselves to be enrolled and that means we can't hide behind it, that also means we don't have a script for it so if I'm sensing that something is going awry or I have pushed or I have distorted or maybe I had my own strong feelings about something the moment I get present to that or I can see signs of feedback in the room then we just have to pause and we have to own it. The more conventional end of that would say so we are attempting to wrong model what we want other people to do and there is nothing wrong with that as of course we are at some level but we are not doing it in order to role model. It's not another part of the script or enrolment it's really a way of being alive to what's unfolding, what's not working, where we are getting stuck in the moment and then simply being willing to engage with that in a distress freeway, in as shame freeway as possible in order to move something on. So it's not that you don't have those feelings, I am sure we all have those feelings periodically, we may just be a bit more familiar with the feelings of discomfort but we don't let it get in the way. There was a lovely example, one of our colleagues a couple of months ago

went to do a piece of work with a large group, a big cohort and the whole piece of the work they were enquiring into was how to be flexible, more agile and to more rapidly come into a relationship with mistakes and things that weren't working and then backtrack and learn from it and it was a big daunting piece of work and in the heat of it she suddenly realised that actually what she was proposing wouldn't work but they didn't know it yet. Now she could have pretended, she just ripped it up and started again in the moment and what was interesting was it turned out to be the most pivotal thing in the work that day was that people saw a change of mind and a rapid recovery without blame or shame and it changed the tone and the flavour of the work completely.

Phil: There is so much in that that I want to ask questions about. So I am interested in this idea of enrolment because one of the things that fascinate me is the identity work that people do. So is the way that the roles or the personas they take shape who they are and what they allow themselves to do or not to do and I am also interested in what you said right at the end about ripping it up and starting again without blame, without shame and change of mind is what got me because I don't think it is viewed as a credible trait in the workplace. So once you have made a decision to do something to then change your mind, own that change of mind and go back on that and change I think is, and I have definitely found that in business, because a part of me almost wants to go back to the political aspect because there was some mind changing in that recently and the way that was framed I found really fascinating, but anyway I will stick away from the politics stuff and we will keep it in the workplace for now. So can we start with the identity stuff then because I really like that point you made around being enrolled and some of the limitations that that can bring. So in the work that you do with the businesses and individuals that you work with does being enrolled get people stuck? I suppose that is a very closed question and I am hoping you will give me some latitude with a nice big open response rather than just yes or no.

Claire: I think it is fascinating. The first thing you should know is that I have never used that word enrolled before.

Phil: Oh really?

Claire: So I don't have any prepared answer for that.

Phil: That's fine.

Claire: Khurshed may have a better view but for me, I think fixed identities within the workplace associated with either behaviour or leadership collapse with authority reduce your manoeuvrability. So they set up protocols and expectations which run both ways from people who are leading and people who are being led and then they get locked in a figure of eight and I've seen some examples - we were working with a CEO and have done for a number of years who leads a healthcare company and he has deliberately tried to, if you like, bend and break the traditional identity of what a CEO does in that business and in the early phases of that, they have a policy where all feedback just comes in and they don't edit it so he gets to see it, and some of the ways that he was described by members of his company were deeply hurtful, or at least they would be to a person who wasn't a challenging leader, deeply hurtful, deeply personal, very aggressive, quite a lot of that was based on a broken expectation because he broke an identity mould about how he should behave. So I think they do limit your manoeuvrability.

Khurshed: I think that is a positive example of a more negative one which is the same point but coming from a different direction is that once you establish an identity called expert, CEO, stronger and cleverer than anyone else, quick to blame, quick to persecute if you do anything wrong, never satisfied, incredibly demanding then as you learn and as you shift and as you learn to flex that there

is a complete disbelief in your organisation that any of it is real and I have seen that over and over again as well that because of the privileged position we have we get to hear these individuals talk about how much pain that causes them, how much they don't want to be in that frame, how much more difficult and exhausting it is, how they don't want to be seen or related to that way, how they are ready to try and shift it and they do and the first few times it almost doesn't matter how they show up they will still be seen and listened to and heard from their old identity and so it's incredibly difficult to shift this idea of identity it's no simple thing.

Phil: So there's a sociologist who I am a huge fan of called Erving Goffman, he first surfaced in the fifties but he got more publically known in the sixties and the seventies. He talks about the concept of face, there are links I suppose to an Asian, Eastern kind of cultural version of face but he talks about face being the line that you take in [indescribable 00:43:50] interactions and when you take a line other people have to let you take that line and sometimes that line can be given to you by your seniority or by a role that you have or by a title that you are given, so some people let you take the line more than others but once you take that line and other people let you take that line then taking a different line becomes tougher especially the more and more and more that line, to push a metaphor may be a bit too far, the more that line has been trodden the harder it is then to take a different one and not necessarily because the individual might want to take a different line but the others, which could be one person or many other people, won't let you take the other line they will do everything they can to bring you back to the line that you are expected to take either because you are expected in the role you are in or because you have taken it before or whatever, so Goffman's work on faces has been taken in and extrapolated out by different researchers but for me I think there is four maybe five aspects of face that are always at play so one of those being who you are, so your sense of self, your values, your beliefs that sort of stuff, the second one is the company that you represent so if you represent an organisation you have an aspect of their identity as part of who you are at that time if you are part of them, then you have got your competence or your role or profession face but the role that you represent, so if you are an FD or an MD or an Ops Director you should have some competence in that particular area and then lastly is the relationship face with the people that you are interacting with because the lines that you have taken vary between who you are with, so when you are with your boss often people take a different line to when they are with their team or whether they are on a stage presenting to many many people and those four kinds of aspects, everyone works with them in different ways and some become users, I will swap metaphors which may not help my explanation but I will do it anyway. If you think of it like a stage, Goffman talks about from a stage point of view that some are foregrounded and some are backgrounded, so depending on what you are talking about and what you are doing you can change footing, so you can say right I am going to foreground this one now and I am going to background this one instead or I am going to foreground these two or background these two and you can play with it in that way. So now I have articulated all of that what is the point I wanted to make. So, therefore, working with identity is hard work to do but we put very little thought into it. I think generally speaking if I can make an unfair generalisation across the population I think in the workplace, executives especially give very little thought to how they are working and grappling with those identities and therefore that can make it harder to shift and change or tick some of those of. So the individual you were talking about Khurshed you were saying how they constantly redefine, break what it is to be a CEO I can imagine how hard work that is but also how liberating that is but also I wonder how disconcerting that is for some of the people who want him to be straight and true and to take a consistent line. Sorry, that's me talking a lot.

Claire: No, no I think what's important from that for me is that consistency is not necessarily straight and true, conflating those two things together is very difficult.

Phil: Good point, yes.

Khurshed: But also I think the other piece that comes out strongly from what you just said Phil is that there are two parties in this, both the actor and the audience I think have equally strong influences on this and much of our work, yes, is with the actor themselves but then also has to be with an audience that says they want one thing but act in, particularly around the concepts of empowerment, uncertainty and difference of opinion and contention and these things are easy to ask for and also easy to reject when they come your way because of course, it puts more responsibility on your part in all of this. So I think taking away this historic obsession with a very narrow focus on the CEO and the top team and broadening it to how do you work with a system is a really key part of everything that what you have just offered us.

Claire: Do you remember the chap that we had on the first or second challenge in Florence?

Khurshed: Yes.

Claire: We haven't done it this year but we run these very intensive weeks that challenge leadership, highly experiential, emotional charge for all sorts of reasons but deep exploration like diving into a deep pool about how you are, what you are trying to cause and liberating yourself from anxiety and all that kind of stuff and we had this chap who really really became fascinated by witnessing all of these different identities during the course of the week.

Phil: Okay.

Claire: And to your point and so we asked him, because when people get fascinated by stuff we grounding it in the now, we asked him to run an identity retreat and so we put together an identity retreat and he has ran it twice and in that retreat we do an exploration with masks, with clothing, with pre-inquiry questions and in the last one we had a whole bunch of people, senior people in organisations, coming along just taking a weekend to try and come into a relationship with the identities that are in their foreground and the organisation at this point in their life and the ones that were either put in their background which I privately describe as the problem with the midlife crisis or the things that had been put away or are knocking on the door wanting to come into the foreground but don't have play space and he has done some fabulous work in that, so he is leading our organisation but it became his personal inquiry and it has helped his own work enormously but he has generously provided a space with our assistance for other people to do theirs. The thing I remember most about him was putting himself into the identity of other people around him, not just for ten minutes but for an hour, two hours, three hours and really role them in and learn so much from that process, being part of the audience.

Khurshed: I think what that illustrates in part is what is needed to do this work and so traditionally I think we thought for too long about these processes of development as if they are some kind of linear path or the metaphor of a journey has become x-factor cliché-ridden but is still the predominant one that is used. It's used not in a linear way so journeys have all kinds of twists and bends in the road, but journeys still have a start and an end right and I think why that doesn't help us is that this quality of learning is not a journey, it's like a series of predicaments and dilemmas and tension points and it's just a constant unfolding of life as it comes at you. So that helps me and I think it helps our clients quite a lot as a distinction because it stops this obsession with I started here and I've got this far and when I will get to that endpoint and it becomes a much more hopeful, much less demanding practice in some ways by just saying no there isn't one, there isn't a destination, it's simply how I will now meet tomorrow's dilemma in a way which is more consistent with the way I want to move rather than where I am trying to move away from and that to my experience and our way of thinking and our way of writing is the only way that identity shifts. If I don't believe that then



I lose quite a lot of hope because I know if I just make it very personal, I have been working on my own shit for years and a lot of it is still around and it possibly might even be around in an even more stark and destructive manner than it was 20 or 30 years ago so that's a pretty hopeless state to get to.

Phil: Claire just spit out her tea there.

Khurshed: I don't need you to back me up but thank you very much. Except that in the moment that I meet the next dilemma coming at me this evening from my children or tomorrow from a teammate or the day after from a client I can only try and apply my learning in that moment in a way which makes a difference and then I feel a bit more hopeful, a bit less weighed down by it.

Phil: [Indescribable 00:53:18] across the table because there was a big intake of breath and I wasn't sure whether you had got something that you wanted to say.

Claire: Yes, I do find that very moving, I mean I think it's very right, I do find it very moving and it's important part of our process. Listening to you and I know you really well describe that, I find that as moving as when I do when I hear clients describe it in slightly different ways in their own language. When I think about all of the encounters that we have had over the years and there have been many years and many encounters you are right lots of people come back for more periods of time because we do know how to walk beside people without judging them and that's important actually and that's often missing in this kind of work. I guess the thing that just comes to me again and always comes up for me that there are three really interesting vows in zen, there are so many it's just not true but there are three particularly interesting ones and the first vow is the vow of not knowing.

Phil: Okay.

Claire: And that's an interesting statement in the context of what we are describing because often not knowing provokes quite strong emotion.

Phil: Yes.

Claire: But we try to practice the vow of not knowing and leaders who try to practice that have more opportunity to be more intimate with what's happening commercially, strategically, culturally and try and find out rather than assuming they know. Then the next one is the vow of bearing witness which when we were doing our early research we called it witnessing the establishment which is simply being able to see or presence or experience what's actually happening in all parts whether you like it or not and what naturally arises from that is the vow of compassion of action. So they are nested in each other to use that word again if you try to practice not knowing which is the willingness to break open your identity, not getting caught up by the negativity associated with feeling vulnerable, you try to practice that as a leader, you try to be present to all parts of the situation, parts of the team or parts of the commercial problem or parts of the strategy or parts of yourself, even the bits that don't feel so great, somehow compassion for yourself and for others naturally begins to arise and that just changes your action and I think that was a statement I think what you were saying had a very compassionate statement in.

Khurshed: To demonstrate the difference between us Claire's inspirations come from a deep study of Zen Buddhism and mine, I'm going to offer you from Watching Wonder woman at the weekend with my two daughters who are coming up to eight and ten, so it's my ten-year-olds tenth birthday and one of the things she wanted to do on her birthday weekend was go and see Wonder Woman, so off we went and I sat there and there is a point in the film where fairly typically and this won't

ruin it for anyone, it's a story of a journey full of [indescribable 00:56:25] and predicaments that they face along the way, they are a band of brothers and sisters that have to do this thing and they face into these things as they go and one of the band is brought along because he is this incredibly skilled sniper but in the moment that Wonder Woman asks him to take this incredibly difficult shot he can't do it and she says to one of the other team that evening, well what's he here for then, what's the point of him and the message that she gets back is a kind one which is everyone's fighting their own battle, everyone's fighting a battle and then she gets her adjustment around her kindness. So the next morning when they are off again and the sniper says you don't need me, I'm not sure I'm necessary, I think I'll stop here, I'm not sure what I'm here for she says, of course, we need you, you are here because you can sing, which is another great quality that he has. But I think that act of kindness in the moment was transformative in the film and then, of course, he recovers his skill at doing his shooting and I think there is something in that quality of kindness that is both missing and desperately needed in our organisations today, certainly in the organisations we work in and with the clients we work with. It is easy to lose sight of, it is most difficult to grab hold of in those moments of high uncertainty and distress and destabilisation but if there was one transformative thing that we could encourage each other to do it's in those moments to reach for a kind response as a starting point, as an opening to something else and when we are able to do that with each other then everything else falls into place.

Phil: I am trying to think what is the near enemy of kindness because I can imagine, so I don't know if that's platitude?

Claire: Rescuing.

Phil: Rescuing, okay.

Khurshed: So superwoman didn't rescue him right, it wasn't but of course you are a phenomenal sniper, you have done the following and we know you can do it but that wasn't it, it wasn't a let me take the shot for you next time or let someone else take the shot, that would be a form of rescuing, kindness is just in that moment, in that example authentically naming the quality that meant they needed him there that didn't feel like rescuing to me as I was watching it and you can tell the difference if you look inside yourself because rescuing just feels a little bit icky, kindness feels liberating.

Phil: When you describe that ickiness or liberating is that from the perspective from Wonder Woman or the sniper?

Khurshed: It would feel icky to the sniper and I suspect it would feel icky to Wonder Woman if she was able to look inside because rescuing typically comes from our own distress in response to the other person's distress and that's the icky bit that we are acting not really completely motivated by the other but mostly motivated by what's going on for us in that moment.

Phil: Because we want to end it or finish it or leave it.

Khurshed: Exactly and that's what brings us a little bit full circle. It's that inability to tolerate our own anxiety, our anxiety in a relationship, our anxiety in teams, our anxiety in businesses that means we don't do this work and that's the heart of this work, how do you bring your ability to cause anxiety around you and to work with your own and other people's as you cause it in such a way that the whole business can move forward rather than fragmental collapse or self-destruct.

Phil: Okay. So I feel torn between, Khurshed you said just a few seconds ago that brings us full circle back to where we began, so part of me is thinking have we literally come full circle then, have we come to the end of our conversation, but I also am enjoying it so much that I don't want to end it at the same time really. So a couple of things that we have referred to implicitly that the listener might not know about explicitly, so we have talked about challenger a few times, we have talked about the challenger retreat and you talked about challenge in leadership but we haven't really explained what that is, would it be useful to just give an explanation to the listener as to what that is and what that means for you guys?

Khurshed: So I think we did a little bit of it earlier on when we were trying to contextualise some of the conversations. Our work, our practice, our passion, our research, our writing is rooted in how do you stand with one foot inside the status quo and one foot outside, how do you stand at the edges of the established system and ways of working and cause it to be different. In a nutshell that's our interest and that is what we have written about, that's what informed our experiences and that kind of work is what has informed this conversation.

Phil: Okay. So before I do bring it together then and we will get into some questions that a lot of guests around reading and stuff like that, before I do that is there anything else that anyone is thinking, feeling, wants to say before pulling it together?

Claire: I just think that a notion of kindness is worthy of pausing on to be honest with you because in the stories and the way that I was thinking about it I think it's a combination of vulnerability and strength, it's a combination of tenderness and determination as opposed to rescuing or avoiding and I don't really think we talk a lot about kindness in organisational life actually, I don't think we talk about that a lot at all.

Phil: If I look at all of the data that I have collected talking about cultural kindness very very rarely features, kindness is just a word that doesn't feature in the data subset.

Khurshed: I think the reason is really pertinent to our work and our client base, this particularly applies as you get more senior in organisational life and the bit that is saddening is that it's almost as if we have justified to ourselves a massive deficit in empathy towards these people who we imagine are highly paid enough not to need kindness.

Phil: Okay.

Khurshed: And they probably tell themselves that same story as well, in fact many of them said to me, you know I get paid enough not to have to be concerned about how kind or not people are to me or how kind I am or not to other people and I think that is a false equation and of course I want the best for the individuals we work with but my motivation on this is wider than that, it's rooted in the belief that if we can practice and if we can close that deficit then ultimately we will change not just those individuals but their teams and their businesses, society and the world. There is enough of a ripple effect that I have seen enough times to be convinced by and there are difficult populations to feel kind towards, I think our client base is one of them and if we could bring more of that quality into the places we work in and if we as a profession can do that then that could be a little bit of magic.

Phil: Okay, alright. One of the things that I get challenged on and by is that I have a habit of caring too much at times, so I remember a couple of years ago I was doing a piece of work with a client, quite a long relationship, we worked together for about ten months I think it was and I remember getting very close to the organisation, to the people within it and cared a lot about what was

happening, what was being done and so on and bearing in mind that I wasn't an employee, there is a challenge of did I care too much? The answer to that is yes and did it hinder, I think at times but that, I think that caring, so there was caring but there wasn't rescuing, so what I didn't do was fix it, it wasn't about me, I care so much I felt like that I had to fix it and make it better that was there for a bit and that was there and that didn't help me because then I felt like I wasn't influencing, I wasn't making a difference but I remember using a metaphor about being on the top of a roller coaster and the wheels fell off and I was trying to put the wheels back on and I couldn't, I just didn't have the capability to fix it and then I realised that I didn't have to fix it actually I could carry on riding to see where it goes, but the care remained all the way throughout so it wasn't like I stopped caring when I realised that I didn't have to fix the wheel back on, I still cared a lot but I just worked with the ride and went with it. I remember that being a really hard thing to do, I'd lie awake at night, not sleep properly, horrible knotty feelings in my stomach and all of that stuff that went with it.

Claire: But you implied from that or I think you eluded that you had some feedback that you cared too much as if somehow that's a negative thing.

Phil: Yes. I think does it leave me open to stuff - yes, but it's something that's a thing for me but it's something that I'm just like well that's just me then, that's part of who I am, it's part of what I do, it's the reason that I will message people through Twitter who I know and am concerned about but I don't necessarily have a deep relationship with, but I will just message them and say I just thought I would let you know that there are two non-judgemental ears here if you want to use them and just kind of leave it at that. So maybe I am just grabbing that in a flawed but willing way.

Khurshed: I do think it is hard work around professional and compassion for that struggle and I think the fact that you are conscious of that struggle is a great thing and suggests that you are working with it and on it. I am sure Claire, as I certainly have struggled with the same. I trained for many years as a therapist and that helped a lot to get to grips with some of this and to keep on challenging myself about how much of my distress was about me rather than about them and also how much of my care could end up being debilitating for the client rather than empowering for them and once I got my mind to a place of adjustment around those things i.e. I think I am doing what would really help but actually it's doing the very opposite, something shifted and made me leave it alone and so I started in a practice that I still hold very true to today which is as long as I am sitting in front of a client I will give them everything I have got and then when I walk out of the door it is left with them. That's not to say I have stopped caring, that's not to say there is no contact or conversation in between sessions or anything like that but I am very clear it is left with them and not with me and somehow that has enabled me to move much more easily in the world as a result but more importantly I have seen the client outcomes improve significantly as a result of somehow me not taking over inadvertently dominating it somehow has made a big difference to their own ability to sort out their own life and work and I think it is a lifelong thing that we have to keep on to. Your story resonates a lot with me.

Phil: Okay. So Claire earlier on you said you wanted us to stick with the kindness bit for a bit longer, how are you with that now?

Claire: There is lots going on in my head, I'll take it away so it's away in a way for me, what constitutes kindness as a leader and what constitutes kindness in a team and the near enemy of that would be rescue and avoidance and jolliness and actually it is not about that and I think what I got out of that conversation between the two of you was a sense that caring needs to be balanced with skilful changeability and if you put those two things together what you have is expressions of compassion which may be quite understated, where one might let something go compassionately. So that was an interesting interchange. The other thing that arises for me about is just perspective



actually, it seems really really important to help people cultivate perspective but perspective is not a gateway to coping out so perspective is a way or having a sense of the long game or the fact that you are part of a lineage of people trying to shift organisations and change the way that human systems work and having served society and so you are part of the long game so you will pick up a baton and you will do a certain amount but what's important is that you don't wreck yourself in the process but that you wreck yourself enough to be moved by your activity, that it means something to you. So perspective is often misspoken about, it's not an excuse for coping out or saying well in the grand scheme of things blah blah blah, that kind of speaking is just an excuse for avoidance really. So perspective plus kindness could be quite fierce.

Phil: We've had a number of those today. So you have got perspective plus kindness, compassion and strength I think. You've said a number of those today which have all triggered some thoughts for me.

Khurshed: It's an interesting thing that's emerged for you is actually in the Flawed but Willing book the structure is around power and love and the integration of those two qualities. So it's interesting that that's what you've picked up, I think there is something that transforms and brings things together and potentially the over-caring bit that you were talking about is when we have an imbalance of power, [indescribable 01:14:02] and of course the overemphasis on power has another effect but some integration of the two is the territory we are aiming for. I think at a semantic level as we finish here it's interesting to me how I feel differently than I did an hour ago and I think that's because we have been in a conversation that has had some of the qualities we have been talking about here in it, so I am reflecting on what it must be like for clients who are even more on the receiving end of this, we are getting an experience of it now and it may be useful to hear how you are but as I check into myself I feel a little bit less rigid, less tired, I feel more connected to you as a person that I have never met before physically and there is something in there, I am more curious, I have some more excitement about the conversation that is to follow and I have also got a sense in which the next two days which are going to be very intensive facilitation for two full days of a team that I don't enjoy particularly. I am just going to be more skilful and maybe we will get a more better result as a result of spending an hour in this department and territory and so I think this maybe is part of the benefit that we are talking about.

Phil: Thank you Khurshed.

Claire: It's good to be moved isn't it? It's good to have your life deepened by a conversation and that's the innocence of what we try to do but we learned a long time ago that we couldn't do that for others without doing it for ourselves continuously. So has this conversation deepened my life - quite likely, it has reconnected me, you can see I am in the middle of watering around the eyes and have been for the past 20 minutes.

Phil: And for me so yes it was interesting as my voice changed about 20 minutes ago, not consciously and as it was happening I was like I am not an interviewer anymore I'm part of it, there was a change in my voice and a shifting but I remember noticing my voice change. But yes very much enjoyed and lots to think about, this is definitely a podcast I will be listening back to a few times to go back and rehear everything that we have discussed and covered. Feeling very grateful to you both for your time, so thank you very much. You know what I don't want to do anything else so I am just going to leave it there, so I am going to say thank you very much for your time today and thank you to everyone for listening to the podcast.