250417 Emma Pears The Secret Sauce of Servant Leadership

[Speaker: Mike Hickman]

[00:00:00] Welcome to the Ordinary Extraordinary Leaders Podcast from Community First Yorkshire. I'm Mike Hickman, leadership development and training manager. And if you've been listening to this series, you'll know we've had a variety of exciting and interesting guests across the course of the previous 10 or so podcasts.

We are delighted today to have Emma Pears from SELFA with us who I will allow to introduce herself.

**[Speaker: Emma Pears]**

Thanks, Mike. So hi folks. Today I am going to talk to you a little bit about my leadership journey and what I've learned along the way over my, ooh, three decades now in the social sector. I want to introduce to you today eight of the characteristics of servant leadership because it's a model that I [00:01:00] really try and aspire to as a leader. And I think it's a really great place to start if you want to reflect on being a leader within the social sector. So I won't have time to go through everything in the next few minutes, but I think I want to give you a little few insights into what it means to me.

And I thought it would be nice to start with a quote from a great leadership expert who is Brene Brown, who says, "A leader is someone who finds and develops the potential in people and processes and who has the courage to do so." And I thought that was particularly relevant because out of the eight characteristics of being a servant, leadership coverage is in there along with accountability, altruism, listening, integrity, compassion, humility, and authenticity. So for me, being a courageous leader is about being open to taking calculated risks. It's about standing up for what's morally right, despite having negative [00:02:00] adversaries. Having high ethical contact and speaking your mind and telling your heart, and I think that that's super important to me as a leader.

I helped to set up SELFA for Children's Charity 18 years ago now, and it hasn't always been a smooth path. And in the start, I didn't really see myself as a leader. I think that that's something that's developed over time. I just was somebody who wanted to help others and I think particularly help children, young people, and their families.

So I think that at that point in my leadership journey, I probably was quite courageous, but I just didn't see myself as a leader. I saw myself as a helper really. And I think that if we focus on the characteristic of courage, what it looks like and how you can get it, for me it's about being able to talk about being in the context really of being risk averse [00:03:00] rather than being courageous.

I often take risks when the odds are in my favour and the loss is limited. And sometimes that's not very courageous. It is no bad thing, but I also think that when I do that, I limit my exposure to new experiences and learning more about myself and my personal growth. So it really is about stepping out of my comfort zone and being courageous. For me it is about speaking the truth - even though my voice shakes and that is really, really important. So I think that quite often I get that really sickly feeling in my stomach about whenever I have to deal with something and I know that I need courage, whether that's speaking to a team member or a parent or a funder about what we're going to do and actually being really worried about the [00:04:00] outcome. I think that underneath all that is being a people pleaser, which I think I really am very much so, and I think it's really fighting that people pleaser in me. And I'd just like to ask the listeners out there to have a think about whether they feel courageous and maybe one area of their role that they'd like to take a risk in.

And what is blocking them from doing that right now? How can you start that shift from being risk averse to being courageous?

So, moving on, I'd like to go on to talk about authenticity. So I think there are a lot of areas of authenticity that I try and emulate. I think it's about being vulnerable.

I think it's about showing your true identity and intentions, adhering to strong moral principles; being true to yourself, [00:05:00] being open to learn from criticism and having consistent behavior. And I find authenticity sometimes quite difficult because it comes from a place of wanting to fit in and fitting in is the opposite really of belonging for me and to really truly have belonging, I need to be authentic.

I think that for me, it's around showing up and there's been lots of situations where I've brought my authenticity to work. And actually when my team have said this to me a few years ago. I remember coming into work and I'd recently lost a friend to cancer and just being really, really upset about it. Really, like, devastated and just bursting into tears and, and saying about how upset I was and how sad and how unfair it all was. And my team said to me after that - I'm filling up talking [00:06:00] about it - but my team has said to me after that that actually that they felt like a bit of a shift from me being authentic at work.

And I think that that really led me down a path of just actually being able to learn from things and to realise that, as Maya Angelou says, nothing will work unless I do, or unless you do. I think that very much I try to be authentic at work and getting comfortable saying things like, you know, thanks for correcting me.

I didn't realise that if I get things wrong, I can say now that I'm wrong and that I've changed my mind about things and that I should do more research before I argue a point because there is no shame in being wrong. I think only refusing to learn, and I think getting comfortable in that bit is really important.

[00:07:00] I recently did some exit interviews with staff who were leaving our organisation, both going on to fantastic roles, but I actually, in that process, I had to just be able to listen. And that for me was super important and it's a super, super important characteristic of being that servant leader as well, you know, listening.

So that kind of takes me quite nicely onto that as well. Listening and being authentic I think do come hand in hand. So just thinking about authenticity, I wonder if you out there want to think about, do you share your fears and struggles openly within your team, and do you admit when you make mistakes?

And what could you do to be more authentic today? So, I was talking about listening there. So listening is a great one to go on to for me because for me it's about having a deep commitment to listening actively and respectively asking questions to create knowledge, and providing time for reflection and [00:08:00] silence, and being conscious of what is unsaid.

I think that's super important. And for me, I am not a natural listener. I'm a natural talker. My default setting really is to think about what I want to say to you before you finish speaking. So, I love, you know, I love talking, but actually, for true connection and to be a true servant leader, I see that listening is the one super important skill.

And, you know, it comes from that kind of thinking, what's the saying? A shy bairn never gets the milk. And actually, you know, I do think that talking comes from that point of view, but listening for me is about actually, you know, those kind of questions. And and even if I see things differently to people, I can say that.

I can say, hmm. I hear you. I [00:09:00] see things differently, but I do hear what you're saying and that in itself is a really important thing for me to just say. I hear you. Whenever people are talking, not thinking about my response or anything like that, but just saying, I hear you. You're heard and I think that's such an important thing for all of us to feel - heard.

So moving on from that, I just wanted to quickly touch on humility, which is another characteristic of servant leadership. For me it's about being stable, but also being modest. And I think, being a humble leader is tricky because I think if you look at the world at the moment, we see, you know, internationally, globally, we see leaders who lack humility in every walk of life.

And we are investing more in leadership programs throughout the globe at the moment than actually we were. I think in a recent survey in the States [00:10:00] 50% of organisations said they didn't have leaders coming through that, you know, were meeting their needs. And that was really shocking. Like half of the people that these organisations aren’t training the leaders that they'd want in their organisations.

And it really struck me that actually humility is super important to being a leader. And at the heart of that really for me is around having a high level of self-awareness of your own strengths, but also your development needs, and having that humble attitude. I always say that at working for a children's charity, that children and young people are my biggest teachers because I think that comes from a place of humility.

I'll learn much more from them than I will from any kind of MBA program. I just think that actually being open to new learning opportunities and and non-traditional roots is really [00:11:00] helpful for me. But also humility is about focusing on others more than yourself. And I think that being humble is super important to being a servant leader.

And that actually knowing that other people have a better answer than me.

So, moving on then. I'd just like to think about humility for the listeners out there. And I wonder is there something that you need to ask for help with? And who could you help? Who could help you with them and how could you approach that?

I love this saying, it's refusing to ask for help when you need it is refusing someone the opportunity to be helpful cos I know for me that I feel so useful when people ask me for help. And I have heard stories about organisations that, have done something called a [00:12:00] listening booth. I think it is where they have people on either side and you're just there to share your story and ask for help.

And I think that that's super important just to be able to ask for help and know that we don't know all the answers, and that sometimes our answers are wrong. I think that that is really helpful.

So finally, I'd just like to leave you all with something that really, really works for me and helps me be a servant leader to bring together all those eight characteristics and go and look them up because there's so much that can be learned.

I have them printed out on my wall, you know, everything from altruism to integrity, you know, we all need them to be able to lead effectively. In the social sector. But I did want to kind of like look at a practical tool that I use to help me be a more resilient leader, a more compassionate leader, [00:13:00] and ultimately a servant leader.

And that's something called feed forward rather than feedback. I think that that's really helpful for me to be able to look at, [be] reflective, but also like forward thinking practice. And this comes rooted in. I was doing a coaching qualification a few years ago and I'd asked my teams a number of questions about me and the way I worked, and then I got all these answers back.

And actually I knew if I started to delve in with them that that could be actually quite, you know, there could be quite a lot of negative stuff that came out of this. You know, it's like, well, you do this and maybe you don't realise, but you do that. So I was really, really struggling and my mentor at the time said, well, why don't you ask them for feed forward rather than feedback?

And it meant looking at the kind of things that I knew about myself. And saying, I'd like to be better at this, and how could you help me? So, one of the [00:14:00] things was around giving consistent messages to the team and, you know, or inconsistent messages as they were. So, you know, people sometimes find out about things from others and they were like, you know, not sure whether, you know, things had come on the grapevine and, it had, you know, got lost in translation. So I, you know, one of the things I said was, I want, would like to be better at communicating with the team. Can you give me any tips for how that would work for you? And I got some really good feedback.

So I used feet forward for that. So I just wanted to leave that with you. And that's it. Cos at the end of the day, leadership is really about fitting all those misshapen pieces together. And being your own perfectly imperfect puzzle, you know, with a few bits missing really along the way.

It isn't a science, leadership [00:15:00] isn't, it's all based on relationships and relationships are probably about 80% of what my work is. And without them, I'm no leader at all really. So, hopefully that's given you a few little insights and you'll find them helpful and um, yeah, do feel free to look me up - Emma Pears, I'm on LinkedIn and you can go to the SELFA website as well, S-E-L-F-A and you can contact me there.

Thanks.

**[Speaker: Mike Hickman]**

Thank you very much Emma. So much food for thought in that and an opportunity for me to listen for the last 15 minutes about servant leadership. I'm just interested in crossovers with other podcasts we've done.

Also, one, perhaps we ought to do around the subject of psychological safety and what it means to be authentic and how people may or may not feel safe to be authentic in an organisation. There's lots and lots of things I hope [00:16:00] people are thinking now, and of course you can contact us: leadership@communityfirstyorkshire.org.uk and I hope you'll be there to listen to more of the podcasts in the Extraordinary Ordinary Leaders series.

But Emma, for today's podcast, thank you.

**[Speaker: Emma Pears]**

Thank you.