

EP 78 - David Mead - The 3 Characteristics Leaders Need to Practice in Today's Environment

Mitch Simon: Welcome to another episode of Team Anywhere where CEOs, leaders, and experts at building teams,

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: companies,

Mitch Simon: organizations,

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: and amazing cultures share how to lead from anywhere in the world. I'm your co-host on the east coast, Ginny Bianco-Mathis.

Mitch Simon: And I'm your co-host on the west coast, Mitch Simon. And we invite you to join us to Team Anywhere.

In today's podcast, we interview David Mead, leadership and culture guru. You may know David from the book, "Find Your Why," where he was a co-author with Simon Sinek. David shares how leaders can build greater connection through genuine feedback, solid appreciation, and brutal responsibility and create meaningful engagement as you Team Anywhere.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Welcome to another episode of Team Anywhere. I'm your co-host, Dr Virginia Bianco-Mathis on the east coast. And I'm here with my fabulous co-host, Mitch Simon, on the west. Today, we have an incredible guest, David Mead. And you probably know him, even if at first, you don't even recognize that you know him. That's what I found out anyway.

David is a leadership guru. And he did a whole stint of entrepreneur kinds of activities in his early years, and learned an incredible amount. One of the major learnings from that was he saw that a lot of leaders do not take care of some of the basic things that get them into trouble.

He got an MBA in organizational development. True to my heart. And then he started working with Simon Sinek. And he wrote a book with Peter Docker and Simon Sinek called, "Find Your Why," which some of you may have heard of.

Mitch Simon: I've heard of that book, Ginny.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Have you heard of it? Okay.

Mitch Simon: I have.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: And then in 2019, David decided to move on, do his own thing, share some of his learnings in his David Mead kind of successful way. And his goal is to help build leaders and teams to maintain cultures on trust and human connection. Welcome, David.

David Mead: Thank you. I'm really looking forward to the conversation, Ginny and Mitch.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yep, same here. So let's start with-

I don't think we can ignore the times we're living in. What have you learned from the past two years?

David Mead: I don't even know where to start. I'll give you two thoughts. One is what I've learned personally, and then what I've learned also, just from an organizational perspective.

What I've learned for myself is the importance of being proactive.

I was a little behind the curve, to be honest, when all these things started to go down a couple of years ago. I sort of sat back and I was like, okay, it's March. By fall, we'll probably be good. So I'll just work on some content. I'll start writing a book and, you know, I'll just wait for fall to come around.

And by then clearly, fall of 2020, we were still not anywhere near where I was expecting us to be. And so by then, so many other people that do the kind of work that I do had made those quick pivots to a hybrid or to virtual work and to, you know, online stuff, and using Zoom for events and all this kind of stuff. And I hadn't yet.

It was at that point that I thought, oh, wow. I better start looking at that. And I felt like I was a little behind. So that's one of the things I learned is not that we can foresee what's going to happen, but as soon as those things happen, I think being willing to be flexible and to not do different work, but just do the work that we're doing in a different way, and being open to learning and open to different ways of sharing the ideas that we want to share.

And, you know, I'll be honest with you, hate is a strong word, but I strongly dislike virtual events, especially doing the type of work that I do. Because it's all about trust and human connection in those in-person events where people would come together and you'd have, you know.

The sessions are great. But what happens outside of the sessions, the handshaking, the high-fiving, the, you know, hugging, all those things that we need as human beings, now stripped away from what we're able to do in an event. And it is so much more difficult to not only connect with the audience, but to help them to connect with each other when we're just looking at little squares on the screen.

But be that as it may, I don't think this is ever going to go away fully. And so just learning to adapt and how do we engage people in a different way than we're used to, and how can we stretch ourselves and how can we learn and grow to be better for the people, who we have the privilege of helping to learn.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Right.

David Mead: So that's what I learned for myself.

What I learned looking from the inside out to organizations is, I mean, it was never a secret that putting people at the forefront or taking care of our culture or taking care of the individuals in our charge was an important thing. But I think what leaders are learning is that you can't ignore that anymore.

Because like it or not, you are now deeply involved in your team's personal life. Because every time they turn on their camera, you're in their house. Maybe you're in their bedroom. We didn't have that before. And managers who were uncomfortable with that, or people who sort of had that separation of work and home, all of a sudden now in this place where you can't make that separation anymore.

And so learning to be, again, stretched and grow and be comfortable with that, and to wade through the messiness of dealing with all of that human stuff that now we're just sort of thrown into, that has been a big learning, I think, for leaders and for organizations of how do we bridge that gap successfully and appropriately from a strictly business relationship to bridging that gap of business and personal a little bit, and really-

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Right. And moving through the discomfort that we are seeing many leaders, quite frankly, some of them suffering with. And almost

some of them I have found embarrassed to move into that. So let's look at that a little more.

David Mead: Sure.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Which leads to my question. I've heard you speak and you talked about leaders needing to step out from behind the curtain. And you even used the analogy of the Wizard of Oz. So talk about that. Drop the act and lead with character.

David Mead: Yeah, so where that idea sort of comes from is from my own experience of being led myself throughout my career, and even early in early jobs that I had. And also in observing how leaders and organizations operate all over the world as I was working with Simon Sinek's team for 10 years.

So often, especially when people are in a leadership position, they tend to put on this act. They pretend to be more intelligent or more powerful or more connected or more whatever than they actually are because of the pressure that they feel often with the responsibility that comes with the role that they've been given.

This is not new to anybody. And so I equate that to the Wizard of Oz, right, where you've got, somebody behind this curtain, you know, turning the knobs and pulling the levers and flipping the switches and shouting into a microphone and putting on this act. And everybody, oohs and ahs, and looks at the leader in a particular way. But you pull back the curtain and they're just this frightened old man.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Let's be equal here. Or frightened woman.

David Mead: Frightened woman. Yeah, absolutely. That's sort of what I'm trying to help people understand. That if we, especially in this new environment that we're in, where we have to take care of people, or we have to build these relationships and build trust, and it's so much more difficult to do in a hybrid or remote environment for a lot of us, that's how we're working now, we cannot present ourselves as somebody who we're not, and hope to build those relationships of trust and human connection.

And when we have an organization where that hiding behind the curtain is happening at scale, which means that a majority, if not all of the leaders in that organization or those who are in a position of influence are doing that kind of

thing, it breeds what I call culture dissonance, which means the culture we talk about is not the culture that people actually experience.

And that's when people shut down. They go into self preservation mode. They don't trust. They don't share ideas. They're very afraid to put themselves out there, to be vulnerable, to, you know, innovate, and to share an idea that might not work. All of these things that are such sabotages to all of the things that organizations care so much about, right?

Every organization wants growth. Every organization wants retention. They want innovation. They want performance. They want all of these things. What they don't realize is that by creating these dissonant environments, they are actually, self-sabotaging the exact things that they are trying to achieve.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Totally. So it reminds me of in the past, the analogy was, oh, I have an open door policy. And of course, the door's always closed. Now let's jump to today's hybrid and virtual, all we want all be open. We want to all see our faces on Zoom. It's a trusting environment. And yet people then start to share and they get shut down. So we still have it being played out, but in different ways, as you say. We need to go after the same things. That's my experience. It's learning how to do that.

So let's move into what really resonated with me, which are your three characteristics that you believe a leader needs to practice and demonstrate, especially in these virtual and hybrid environments, and that's honesty, humility, and humanity.

And I know we can do a whole workshop on them, but let's just take each one a little bit and might you describe what you're trying to get at for each one.

David Mead: Sure. Let me just step back for one minute and share where these came from. Because all the things I could have picked, why did I pick these three? And, I certainly don't pretend that these are the three things, you know. I mean, everybody's got their list and their list of three or their list of five things or whatever. But for me, this is very personal. And again, it's from my own experience and what I've observed.

I looked at and I made a list of all of the leaders that I've had, or that I've observed, who are the type of leaders who create these environments of trust and human connection. And I asked myself, what characteristics, or what traits do they have? What did they do that allowed them to do that? And so I wrote down, you know, a list of dozens of traits.

And as I looked at all those, and I sort of boiled them down, it's like, you know, we can't remember to do 35 things, but there was a lot of commonality among those things. And I found that most, if not all of those things fell pretty neatly under an umbrella of sort of these three traits, on honest, humble and human.

And so, you know, while you might say, well, you forgot this one. Maybe. But for me, a lot of times they'll nest underneath one of those three, right?

And so as I think about these people, and again, a trait is simply a way of being. And there have to be behaviors that are attached to those traits. And here's the thing about honest, humble, and human, we can't call ourselves those things, and be that, right? It's only true when somebody else says that of us, right?

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: That, I love that. Yes.

David Mead: And so the aspiration is not to be honest, humble and human. It's to have others perceive us as that way through the behaviors and actions and the practices that we espouse. So I'll just define each one a little bit and give you maybe a quick example, right? There's absolutely sort of the standard dictionary definition for each one of these three, but I like to go a little bit deeper on each one.

So honest. When we're honest, we have the ability to acknowledge and take responsibility for our behaviors. Right?

It's not just that we tell the truth to other people. We don't just acknowledge the truth in other people, we also acknowledge our part in whatever has gone sideways, in whatever situation has gone wrong in whatever relationship, struggle or stress we have. What's my part, what's my piece to own? And being honest about those facts as they exist, right?

And we not only are truth-tellers to other people, we're truth tellers to ourselves. And we're willing to, again, acknowledge what we've done or what we can do better. And an example for that of how we might use that, how we might practice this idea of honesty is to ask for feedback.

We hear that a lot, but I want to inoculate against that just a little bit, because you can't just walk into or hold a meeting and, say to your team, whether it's in-person or virtual, I want you all to know that you can be comfortable giving me feedback. That doesn't work. That seed is not going to grow unless the soil is prepped for that.

You know, it might take a little while because nobody likes to give their boss feedback. Nobody. But when somebody does, or when you get a hint of you've received a little bit of feedback, you celebrate it, you encourage it.

I read an article once. I think it was an HBR article. It was a few months ago, but it was exactly on this topic. And the leader said that when the first time they got a piece of feedback from somebody on their team, they literally threw a party with cake and everything. Because they want it to model that this is what I want. This is what I need from you.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: That's it. Absolutely.

Mitch Simon: So it's not just practicing the thing of saying, I want your feedback. It's doing all the practices that create the environment where people feel comfortable giving you that feedback. Right? That's one example of something we can practice is always be open to feedback. Ask people, Hey, how did you feel about that meeting? What would you do on this project that would be different than how it's happening now?

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Make sure that's part of, at least, every other meeting. Let's do a feedback round. Here's some things I know I want to get better at, but I want to hear some others. So go first, I've found, if the leaders do that, set the stage. Then others will.

And so you have this equal accountability. You know, what more can I do? What more do you all think would be helpful for you to do your best work?

David Mead: You know, I read an interesting article just this morning, in fact, on how to get people to engage with you in a virtual setting. And one of the things that, and again, this could be a practice that could help you get that feedback, is if, you know, the type of feedback you're looking for, send out the question or two before the meeting, so people can have a chance to think about it.

Also give them an opportunity to give you that feedback in different ways. Some people are perfectly comfortable audio off mute, with their camera on. Other people would prefer to answer a question. Hey, would you prefer A or B? And put it in the chat. So use all of those different methods that we now have available to us to get that feedback in ways that are comfortable for the people that you're asking for it from. Don't expect it in one particular way.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Love it. All right. Let's move to humility.

David Mead: Okay. So, humility is really about obviously dropping our ego. Right. And we're never going to get rid of it. We're always going to have it. But it's about having a healthy relationship with that ego. And it's about being able to not only recognize our strengths without letting ego get in the way, which is important.

It's not about being meek or submissive or, oh, no, no, no, or self-deprecating. It's about being confident in what we do well. But in the context of how does that help lift other people up? How does my skill and my ability and the things that I've learned, how can I use that to benefit somebody else? Right.

The opposite of that is to be able to see our weaknesses without defensiveness. Because when we have a weakness called out to us, that's usually when we bristle up, when that wall goes up and that ego says, Nope, that's not me. And the two things that I think about, the phrases that come into my head with people who are truly humble is, they have absolutely no interest in being better than other people, but they have every interest in being better for other people.

And a humble person has no interest in being the smartest person in the room. We talked about it a little bit before. It's this idea of how do I learn? How do I grow? How do I change and adapt to the uncertainty that's around me, so that I can, again, use my position or my experience or the authority that I have to help those who I have the privilege of helping.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: How would you foster that in a virtual environment?

David Mead: There's so many different ways to do it. And I love what you said a minute ago, which is about oftentimes a leader has to go first and model the behavior that you're looking for.

In this particular situation, I'm going to go to the opposite end of the spectrum. And I'm going to say one of the ways that we can practice humility in any setting, virtual works just as well, is to be the last to speak.

So when we're asking for ideas or whatever, and pull those from all the different channels that we can get, not just verbal, what tends to happen is if we have an idea and we put that out first, the team is usually like, oh, well, that's what they want to do. So we'll just do that. Right. So be the last to speak. That's a simple practice that we can use to make sure that we're listening to all of the different perspectives that we're learning. And that we remind ourselves, we're not the smartest person in the room. 'Cause somebody might come up with something that is so much better than what we would have come up with.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Right, right. I really like that. Another extra tip I tend to give leaders in virtual and/or hybrid and even face-to-face is let them know that's what you're doing. So I want to hear everyone else's views. I obviously have some beliefs and feelings around this. And yet I have learned that by listening to you all, I can hone my own views. So let's start that process.

David Mead: And I love that because that leads really nicely into the third thing. Before I dive into that, all of these three things, the honest, humble, and human are not separate and distinct. They blend together. Right. I sort of look at it like concrete mixture, building, a bridge, right?

You have four simple ingredients in concrete, four or five, but if you leave one of those things out, it falls apart. It doesn't work. And this is the same thing. These bleed into each other. They align with each other. And sometimes, it seems like there's a lot of overlap or alignment in these things, but what you just said of, I obviously have my ideas, but I'd love to hear from you because it helps me to hone what I'm doing, and I essentially value what you have to say.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Very well.

David Mead: Let's put this third element, or this third trait of human, which is showing people that they are valued and valuable. It's really about seeing the human behind every individual, not looking at them in terms of their role or their output or their job title, but who is the human in there? And gosh, this is probably the most important thing as we're learning to work in this new hybrid world.

Mitch Simon: Yeah, David, I'd love for you to share some ways on showing people their value and that they're invaluable. I work with a lot of companies where, when we do the surveys, we're finding, even in companies that go over the top to value and appreciate their employees, there still is because I think of this hybrid and virtual disconnection, people still feeling not valued.

You know, I always say, as an Enneagram Type 7 or a high I on the DISC it's like, do you love me? Well, do love me now? Do you love me now? Do you love me now? So I'm just wondering what are some great tips for leaders to definitely show their employees that they're valued and that they are invaluable for the the company's goals?

David Mead: Yeah. A couple of things come to mind right off the top of my head. And again, there are dozens of ways we can do it. But first, it feels like I

don't work on a team in an organization. So I have to get my information by talking and interviewing people who do work in that kind of environment.

But what I'm hearing over and over and over again, we're on the phone or on Zoom all day long with scheduled meetings. And Zoom fatigue, obviously we know how that works. But I think one of the things is call your people on the phone, send them a text message, not scheduled, just to say, Hey, I'm thinking about you or how are you doing?

You know, don't make it a scheduled thing. If we have a schedule check-in every week on Monday for 15 minutes, great. But you know, when they cross your mind, just shoot them a quick message. Hey, I was just thinking about you. Hope you're having great day. Just something simple like that to let-

People love to know that they're being thought about.

The other thing I think we can do. And this happened to me and I'll tell you, the story is kind of interesting, is to make recognition and acknowledgement in those kinds of things as personal as we can. Rather than just sending everybody a \$15 gift card to Starbucks, what does this person care about? What do they like? Do they have a pet? You know, like as we get to know them, well, figure out what makes them tick and what they love and what makes them feel appreciated.

Few years ago, when I was on Simon's team, we were all remote before it was cool. And for my birthday one year, I got a gift from the team and it was a stick. Which was kind of odd. But I read the tag on it and it was essentially a dormant tree that I would plant and that would grow into this beautiful flowering tree. And the card that came along with it-

The tree didn't end up growing, by the way.

Mitch Simon: It was a dormant tree. You said so.

David Mead: It was a very, very dormant tree, but the card that came along with it, that the team had written, that's what I will always remember. And they said, this is a representation of our commitment to you and to your growth and your development.

I thought, wow, like how thoughtful. Instead of just, you know, giving me an Amazon gift card, which happens all the time, it makes me feel not special at all, they took the time to really think about it. How long I'd been there, what I'd

contributed and what their commitment to continuing to work with me over the years.

And that was huge. And so it doesn't have to be these huge things. It doesn't have to be expensive. It doesn't have to be part of a big initiative. Just this is where that human element comes in. Just reach into your soul and figure out what about you cares about that human being and tell them that, in appropriate ways.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Something I have found, there's a leader I know who does the following, even in those scheduled meetings that he now does more often, he thinks beforehand, what am I going to ask this individual help on?

Hey, Joe, you know, I think you're the perfect person to give me your ideas on this. 'Cause I saw you do this in the XYZ project.

What I'm dealing with is, oh my gosh. Folks say that effect is powerful.

David Mead: I love that.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: That he wants my advice. And you'll have to put some thought into this. You have to make sure it's sincere and you don't ask everyone the same thing.

David Mead: Yeah, of course.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: That does show value. And you know what the leader said, I began to appreciate them more when I started that. I love that idea. Now you work with a lot of leaders. To Mitch's point, can you give us a story? Give us a story of a leader that you have worked with, that wow, they are truly on the path towards this because they're doing this, that and that.

David Mead: Yeah, there's a recent one that I've met, that is doing an incredible thing. So, his name is AJ Maestas, and he owns a company called Navigate. They essentially work in data and they help sports franchises analyze the data and you know, sales and concessions and like all of the things to help their sports franchises run more efficiently.

So the thing that I love about examples, like AJ is that he is in a business of numbers and spreadsheets and absolute precision and something that is so seemingly so inhuman. That's his business. But the way he runs that business is incredibly human.

On this particular trait of humanity, of bringing the humanity back into business, when you know, he's been able to safely do so, like he took his entire team out for two weeks. I think two weeks at a dude ranch, where they just had incredible experiences together.

And he does things that are special for his people. He doesn't just, you know, rent out a nice room at a hotel and, you know, have a weekend over there. He really puts a lot of thought into it. And what I love is he spends most of his time working on the culture.

And you think, how does a CEO do that? Because most of the CEOs that I talk to, they say, man, I'm so busy. I have so many things on my plate. I can't put focus on that because my hair's on fire and I'm just putting out fires all day long.

And this doesn't happen overnight, but he says, I don't look at numbers. I don't look at our marketing. I don't look at anything. All I look at is to make sure that I'm creating a runway for these folks so that they can succeed.

Now that's a process and it takes time and it takes a lot of discipline, I think, and humility to let other people take accountability for some of the things that we often hang on to, because we can do it better, and maybe we can. He truly understands his role.

You know, CEO, sometimes they call it Chief Experience Officer, right. He is really making sure that the human experience his people are having when they come to work is something that makes them feel valued and valuable. And I love it just because of the context of the work that he does, you know?

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yes, yes. And then that gets into your other word that you tend to talk aloud a lot about, which is trust. Trust to create that mutual accountability. Share with me what do you think or how you think such a leader should deal with a team member who's not performing. I know that's a real open phrase — 'not performing.'

David Mead: Sure. And there's no one right answer. Every context is different. We know that. Simon Sinek gives an interesting example that I like. He said, if a basketball player on an NBA team has a bad game or two, they don't kick him off the team. They give him more coaching. Right.

And so the idea that firing somebody for performance should be like the very last resort. If they are doing things that are ethically incorrect or doing things that go against the culture, that are ruining that experience and that camaraderie

and the trust and connection that other people are feeling, that would be much more motivation than to just because they're not performing.

Look, we are dealing with so much more now than we were before. We're dealing with kids that are taking school from home. We've got relatives that are sick. We've got so many more responsibilities because now we're getting interrupted all day long at home 'cause we're not, you know.

All of these things, they can affect that performance. So rather than saying, Hey, you need to bring your performance up or you're out of here, it's about, again, that genuine caring and figuring out how do I tap into figure out what this person needs?

Because there's, I forget who said it, but every behavior is the expression of a need. So if I'm not performing, I need something that I'm not getting. And so how do I be curious? How do I ask questions? Forget about myself and what their performance makes me look like and how do I reach out to them and lift them up and see what they need and how I can help to get them to where they need to be? For me, that's always the first course of action.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Given to what the person you spoke about before that kind of CEO who concentrates on the culture and the experience of each person, then the feedback needs to come from that same point of view. People need to know that that's what counts. So that then builds the trust in a very different way.

David Mead: And this is where that dissonance comes in because so often we talk about, you know, our values, our employee value proposition, or the culture that we have here, we talk about it. But then when the pressure's on and people experience that differently than the way it's been talked about, then again, there's that dissonance. Trust breaks down. And all of a sudden, there's this gap.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: And before we wrap this up, you recently did a poll on LinkedIn. And then you talk about those findings in line with another poll that was done by Gallup. What were those key findings?

David Mead: So I asked this a few months ago. If I remember correctly, I asked, what is your company doing to increase retention? Because of the great resignation and so many people leaving, I was curious, what are some of the tactics and the things that organizations are using to get their people to stay. And the options were — increased pay, more perks and benefits, flexibility, mobility, that kind of stuff, increasing the culture or something else.

And I honestly didn't know what to expect. But I was pleasantly surprised to see that most of the responses that came back were around this idea of improving culture, which is great. If I'm not mistaken, the Gallup poll mentioned the same thing. So that's encouraging to me.

And it's not that all those other things don't matter. They absolutely do. But if you have those things without improving the culture, it's like putting a band-aid on the symptom. It's not going to go away.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: That's right. And we've heard about this forever, right? I can look earlier studies that all of the think tanks have done and, you know, engagement in culture, engagement in culture. And now all these leaders and companies have been slapped in the face. You cannot ignore that anymore.

David Mead: Right. You can't just talk about it anymore.

Yup, yup. All right. Well, how can our listeners find you?

You can go to my website at DavidJMead.com You can find me on Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok @DMPropels and LinkedIn at David J Mead.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Fabulous. And you got a new book or you're working on one.

David Mead: Working on it.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: So we will keep our eyes open on that. Thank you so much. This has been delightful. Mitch?

Mitch Simon: Yeah. So do you have a working title yet of your new book?

David Mead: Yeah, the working title I have is 'Behind the Curtain.' That may potentially change, but yeah. Again, it's this idea of how do we just drop the act. Drop the facade that we so that we're so tempted to put up, and just show up as who we are and learn to connect with people in a more human way.

Mitch Simon: Great. Well, my might take away from this is to really be honest, have humility and humanity is to ask first. And I think as even Ginny was pointing out is really take some time to think about those things that you're going to ask, and that you're going to ask for. Next would be just to listen.

You know, so ask and then listen. And then maybe, maybe, maybe at the end, say something. But it really is, you know, ask, listen, and then talk, you know, once everyone else has had the opportunity to share.

So I've really enjoyed this podcast. It's been really, really special to meet you and have this conversation and want to encourage our listeners to share this episode with their friends and colleagues. And for you to come back next week for our next episode of Team Anywhere.