

# EP 84 - Adam Kahane: Essential Leadership Skills on Facilitation and Negotiation

**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 and I'm your co-host on the West Coast, Mitch Simon. And we invite you to join us to Team Anywhere.

**Mitch Simon:** Today we're excited to connect with Adam Kahane, a global facilitator, negotiator, mediator, and author of "Facilitating Breakthrough: How to Remove Obstacles, Bridge Differences, and Move Forward Together."

Adam brings together people who don't have to work together. Well, in today's world, where you may never be in the same room as your employees, you must have great facilitation skills. The skills to get people to work with you when frankly, they don't have to.

Adam says that leaders must appreciate and focus on three things that all people need and want in order to get things done. Power— to do the things they're motivated to do and contribute their God-given gifts. Love— to build true connection to the people they work with. And Equity— to have the feeling that they and the team are being treated fairly. Great insight from an expert whose clients take him everywhere so you can Team Anywhere.

Hello and welcome to another episode of Team Anywhere. I'm your co-host Mitch Simon on the West Coast and on the East Coast, I have our amazing co-host Dr. Virginia Bianco-Mathis. We're excited to have in the studio today, live from South Africa, Adam Kahane, Director of Reos Partners.

Adam has been praised by Nobel peace prize winners, Nelson Mandela, and Juan Manuel Santos for his work in bringing together lifelong opponents. His

latest book, "Facilitating Breakthrough: How to Remove Obstacles, Bridge Differences and Move Forward Together," launched in August, 2021. We brought Adam on the show to help us understand how to navigate with a newly emboldened and mobile workforce, and how to leverage them as your most important partners.

Hi Adam, how are you doing today?

**Adam Kahane:** I am well and happy to be with you both.

**Mitch Simon:** Great. And how is it in South Africa these days?

**Adam Kahane:** Well, it's the middle of the summer and I'm right at the beach so it's good.

**Mitch Simon:** That's right. You are in one of the most beautiful places in the world, I think.

**Adam Kahane:** It's pretty beautiful. I'm working from here but it's a pleasant place to work from. I guess that relates a lot to the topic of the conversation because I realized for what I have to do in the next few months, I can be anywhere in the world. So why not be, where my wife's from South Africa, where it's nice and warm rather than where I am from, Montreal, where it's very cold.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Absolutely.

## What Adam Learned Over the Past 2 Years

**Mitch Simon:** I was in Montreal this year. It's been a really cold winter in Montreal. And it's always cold. So Adam, let's just kick this off with our first question we ask all our guests. What has surprised you the most personally, and as a society, over the last two years?

**Adam Kahane:** I've been surprised by how quickly I and lots of other people move into fear and contraction and defensiveness, whether it's COVID or climate change or Ukraine, how easy it is or how quick it is to tense up and tighten up. That surprised me. And at the same time, all of these crises also allow new opportunities. Things that we didn't know we could do which are suddenly possible, or suddenly necessary. That two-sided surprise.

**Mitch Simon:** I see. the big phrase out there right now is the Great Resignation, you know, people basically deciding, with this fear or with this freedom, they're choosing to be free. Is this a surprise to you that this is happening right now?

**Adam Kahane:** It's not a surprise to me. Many years ago— I guess it must have been 20 years ago— I was talking with Harriet Rubin, who is a business writer. And she said to me that she was amazed that people who were free citizens on the street were willing to be slaves or highly constrained people at the office. And she didn't think people were gonna put up with that for very long.

I'm not surprised that when people see they can do things more the way they want done, that they take this opportunity. I see this drive to realize yourself to grow, to do things the way you want them done, to be a pretty fundamental thing which just about everybody has.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** I guess what we're saying in agreement to support that this was sort of like an unexpected huge social experiment that happened. We're thrown into a situation and people begin, because they've been forced to step back, to reflect and then redefine. But it wouldn't have happened without this. It would've happened much differently and slower if it hadn't been for this phenomenon.

**Adam Kahane:** Yes, I think that's true, it wouldn't have happened on such a widespread basis. I mean, we're recording this in early March 2022 and so my attention, like many people's, is focused on what's going on in Ukraine. I'll just mention one aspect of that. I don't think anybody predicted or could have predicted that Germany would change its whole post-war defense policy overnight.

And so, it's just another example of the situation changes. Something that seemed impossible is now possible. And people do things that nobody thought they would do. The example you gave, COVID put us all in a completely unexpected context with many terrible consequences but also new opportunities.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yes.

**Adam Kahane:** And people take it— it

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Excellent example.

# Are People Emboldened by Fear Today?

**Mitch Simon:** The first question about fear. It seems like with people being able to say hey I'm gonna move from South Africa. I'm gonna just quit my job and take it off. Do you think fear has embolden people? 'Cause you hear on the news is a lot of fear around COVID still. And then yet you find all of these people pretty much taking their own lives in their own hands. And I'm just wondering, cause you've studied this a lot, what is your interpretation of what's going on?

**Adam Kahane:** Well, I think it's both happening at the same time that there's fear and contraction and defensiveness, and I need to protect myself and my family, and I need to stay indoors, and I need to watch my savings or whatever it is, which I noticed around me and in myself. The first months of COVID, I was surprised at not only how frightened I was, but how much I wanted somebody to take care of it for me and how, for example, how much more willing I was to put my trust in public health officials, et cetera.

But on the other hand, certain things that I didn't think were possible, suddenly became possible. For example, I didn't quit my job but the work of Reos Partners is helping people collaborate to work on complex issues.

So, when COVID hit, I assumed a bit, without a lot of thought, that we would just have to stop doing everything 'cause our work had been flying long distances to get larger groups of people into big rooms, and that was suddenly impossible.

Well, within a week, we realized there is actually another way to do this: online, Zoom, et cetera, which has disadvantages and advantages. But suddenly the things that seemed impossible like could we have global teams working online with nobody having to leave their house? — became possible. So, I think it's both sides.

And what's the undercurrent, and this is why I remembered Harriet Rubin's comment, is people are always trying to do lots of things, but in particular, to realize themselves, to find a way to achieve their destiny and their ambition and their life. And so, when they see oh my God, there's a way of doing this that I didn't know was possible, they grab it.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yes. I think that has happened to the majority of us and it has happened to a lot of CEOs and leaders. And they go, oh my gosh, the innovation that is happening now is more than ever.

On the other hand, we also do seem to have a smaller group who goes, nope, I want everyone back in the office. This hybrid and virtual ain't gonna work, and we need to go back. And I'm shocked that I'm still seeing some of that.

**Adam Kahane:** Well, I suppose that's the case. I don't have much contact with that myself. And of course there was a large part of the population that couldn't work from home and had to go into their workplaces even when it was very dangerous to do so. So this never applied to everybody.

But with respect to what you just said, I think that such leaders are gonna find that some people that don't have a choice or who want to come back, will come back. But other people are gonna say, no thanks. I was enjoying working from home and living somewhere else or being able to give my family more or being in the country. No, I'm not going back to the way things were before.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Totally agree.

## Importance of Negotiation Skills

**Mitch Simon:** The reason we really wanna have you on the podcast is you do a lot of work in negotiations—opponents, people who can't really get together. You have a population called employees that for the most part, didn't have a lot of power. Then post-COVID, they have a lot of power. They have more voice. They're not gonna be told what to do.

How do you as a leader now, first of all, appreciate the fact that almost overnight, your leader's just got a lot more voice and choice, how do you see that as a negotiator in terms of being able to deal with this so you can come out with a win-win solution?

**Adam Kahane:** I guess you could say unusual experience is really relevant, because the work I've been doing for the past 30 years has an unusual quality. It's working with groups of people that don't have to work together, that are from different organizations, that don't necessarily agree with, or like, or trust each other, but have chosen to work together because they think they need to get where they're trying to go, whether this is different stakeholders in a municipal education system or different companies working on how to develop green energy or different parties in a civil war.

So the point is that, all of my experience has been with groups that are genuinely horizontal, where nobody in the room reports to anybody else in the room. And therefore, that easy conventional or commonplace alternative, which

is, if push comes to shove, I'm just gonna tell people what they need to do, doesn't work at all. Zero.

So all of my experiences is in that kind of unusual domain, but I think it gives a hint of the world to come, where to a greater or lesser extent, even people in an organization, are not gonna put up with being ordered about.

So, what does it look like when you can't get things done by forcing and you have to get things done through genuine collaboration with people freely choosing what it is that they think they ought to do in the current situation?

**Mitch Simon:** The things that I think about is, it used to be, it was done by forcing. I remember all my first jobs was—

There was my leader. He wasn't very great. And you know, in my mind I had no choice. You know, we're in a world now where a lot of people are mobile. They're moving around. They're not learning necessarily, you know, how to negotiate. They're not learning great communication skills. And now they're in a world where they need more negotiation and communication skills than ever. It really is now an equal versus an equal.

And I'm just wondering if you have any perspective on that. Is it going to actually kind of force people to get really good at communicating and standing out? Here, Ginny and I, we're leadership coaches 'cause people in general don't do—

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Are really bad at that. Yes.

**Mitch Simon:** You know, now we're entering a world where you're gonna really advance or not, based on how strong you can facilitate, negotiate, arbitrate.

**Adam Kahane:** I think that's true. It's true both of employees and of bosses. That if you remove from the toolkit, well, thanks for your input, but here's what you have to do. Then you have to have other tools or you're not gonna get anywhere.

I remember one of my very first jobs, when I was in the middle of graduate school, I had a job, with a wonderful boss. And I remember saying to a colleague at the time, well, if he tells me at Friday at five, that there's something he needs on Monday, my reaction wasn't to swear under my breath. My reaction was, oh, wonderful. I have an opportunity to contribute. I don't remember what

it was that he was doing, but I remember how struck I was that he was the kind of boss that elicited that for me, that I wanted to do it.

**Mitch Simon:** I see, okay.

**Adam Kahane:** I think that leadership quality, which I call facilitation, helping people work together to get stuff done as contrasted to telling people what they have to do to get stuff done, is becoming more and more important.

## The Qualities of a Good Facilitator

**Mitch Simon:** So let's dig into that a little bit cause of course, as a facilitator, I think of facilitation as something different. And I love the way you're talking about facilitation as now, I'm a leader. I've got a team. They're all over the world, even in Africa. And I need to facilitate versus, I don't know, lead. And so, tell me more about the qualities of that and, how to kind of do that, such that you're gonna be more successful and it's maybe a little bit different than the past.

**Adam Kahane:** Well, I think of facilitation as a way of leading. And it can apply to people who are geographically distributed, as in the example you gave. You know, here I am, today sitting in Africa with team members in the US and other parts of the world. But it can equally apply to people who are in the same city or for that matter in the same office building.

And the difference is the following. Most people think that facilitation involves getting people to do things. When I give talks on facilitation, 100% of the time, somebody will ask the question, well, how do you get people to? How do you get them to come together? How do you get them to agree? How do you get them to listen to each other?

And it's such a common question. I started to think about it. And I realized, in my role as a facilitator where I have no hierarchical authority over anybody, I literally can't get anybody to do anything. So what's the alternative?

And the answer that came to me, actually, that was said to me in a workshop a few years ago in Columbia, which is the first story in this book, *Facilitating Breakthrough*. Somebody came up to me and said, I see what you're doing. He came up to me at the end of first day of workshop. He said, I see what you're doing. And I said, well, what am I doing? He said, you're removing the obstacles to the expression of the mystery. Anyway, the whole book is an

unpacking of that one sentence. I'm not sure what the mystery is. It's not like an Agatha Christie mystery.

But what I thought was really interesting about what he said was this very practical idea— what you are really doing as a facilitator is removing obstacles. And the more I thought about it, I realized, it's one of these things that's pretty simple, but not easy.

And the simple part is you're removing obstacles to people doing three things that they all want to do. They want to contribute. Everybody wants to contribute— their ideas, their energy, their gifts, their ambition. Everybody wants to connect to each other, to the context, to themselves, to others in the world. And everybody wants to contribute and connect equitably or fairly.

And I realized that's actually a hundred percent of the job of facilitation is removing obstacles to contribution, connection and equity. And if you want a fancier way to say that, you could say removing obstacles to power, love, and justice. And suddenly then, all the complexity of leadership and facility of that kind of leadership was clarified to being about removing the obstacles to those three basic drives that everybody, or almost everybody has.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** That is quite elegant.

**Mitch Simon:** Tell us more about that 'cause I'm a big idea guy. So, can you kind of define that? 'Cause I think, people in the podcast hear those things. I think it gives them an understanding 'cause you actually have a book out called, "Power, Love and Justice," right?

**Adam Kahane:** So, I had a previous book called "Power and Love," and this new book, "Facilitating Breakthrough" takes that further and says—

**Mitch Simon:** Take it further. Yes.

**Adam Kahane:** Power and love are two thirds of the story. But it has the element of justice really matters to everybody in different ways. And the idea that not just contribution and connection, but equitable contribution and connection, that's something you need to pay attention to if you're gonna remove the obstacles to people doing what they're trying to do.

# Equitable Contribution and Connection

**Mitch Simon:** What is equitable contribution and connection?

**Adam Kahane:** To state it in the negative, what is inequitable or unjust contribution and connection? The boss gets to do all the talking. The boss gets to make all the decisions. The boss gets to work on what she wants to, or have things in a way that suit her, or to connect with others as she wants to. But people lower down in the organization don't get to do that.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** And the boss also takes all the recognition too?

**Adam Kahane:** Yeah. I mean, when I used to do strategic planning work a long time ago in big companies, the bosses would have a three day retreat. They would have two-hour meeting to inform their subordinates. And everybody else got a memo.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Right, exactly.

**Adam Kahane:** This idea that if we're gonna get everybody's contribution and connection, so that we can get stuff done, that has to be equitable.

Now,

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** those were good examples.

**Adam Kahane:** It just won't be satisfactory. I mean it's not more complicated than that. The people say it is just not fair. So I don't believe it.

## Negotiation 101 with Adam

**Mitch Simon:** Going back to working across the aisle, what I've read a lot is that it's very difficult to engage people who are not in the same room, to deal effectively with conflict or to deal with conflict at all. I know you work across the globe with people who ferociously disagree on certain topics. Do you have any suggestions on how teams can work together to, number one, just kind of name that there's a difficult topic or there's a disagreement. And then two, to encourage them to actually engage in it when they might be on different continents and they also might not have, spent a lot or any time with the people they're speaking to.

**Adam Kahane:** Well, it's a good question. And I said awhile ago that I thought that this virtual work, or the type of work that Reos does, couldn't be done virtually. And then, my colleagues and I discovered it could. And now, I think, two years in I'm also seeing the limits of it.

So just to recognize there's big advantages to this virtual work. I think we all know the limitations. But there's big advantages. That it's possible to work with people from across the globe without having to incur this expense and life disruption of having to travel long distances and be jetlagged and use a lot of money and a lot of carbon. Including people who have disabilities or family responsibilities that make that difficult. It's possible to do it in multiple languages. I guess you probably realize that simultaneous interpretation in Zoom or other online platforms is now really cheap.

So there's real advantages in getting contribution and connection and equity. You know, just earlier today, Reos had a global Zoom call about events in Ukraine and what it means for us. So there are big advantages. But at the same time, I think there's real limitations. And the limitations are getting clearer.

What's required for this to work is to take the time required. And in particular, the time required to understand, how do different people see this situation? Where are they coming from? What do they mean when they say A, B, and C? And that there's no shortcut to that. And not everything can be done online. And we are gonna need, sometimes, to get physically in a room together and work it out.

## **Achieving Free Speech in the Workplace**

**Mitch Simon:** How do you encourage free speech? How do you encourage people to be transparent and authentic? Even if we do have of the opportunity to meet regularly, how do you set up those conditions?

**Adam Kahane:** One of the mistakes that everybody made when they moved to the online world is they thought, this is so much more efficient. We can do it more quickly. We'll just have one half hour Zoom call after another. You know, that may work in certain contexts, but lots of situations where it doesn't.

So, what would you have to do with free speech, or open, authentic, effective communication in person? Well, you would take the time to have different people say what they think, and to ask questions of each other, and to try to go down the ladder of abstraction, and say, well, what are examples of that? And what's the feeling that you have around that? And how do we think these things

are connected? So, I think it's the same conditions online, but this idea that we can just do everything faster online is an error.

## Adam's New Book, Facilitating Breakthrough

**Mitch Simon:** As we close up the show, tell us about your new book, and why it's so important this time? It's a long title, "Facilitating Breakthrough: How to Remove Obstacles, Bridge Differences, and Move Forward Together."

**Adam Kahane:** I think the reason it's important at this time is that because of everything we've spoken about, the world can rely less on getting things done by some people bossing other people around. And the world needs more and better collaboration. And therefore, the world needs more and better facilitation, where I'm defining facilitation, not as a job of the person organizing the zoom call or standing in front of the flip chart, I'm defining facilitation as a kind of leadership that removes obstacles to helping people move forward together.

And the book offers a new theory and practice of facilitation, whether it's within organizations or communities or countries, how is it, what precisely, what are the practices and principles? What are the outer moves and the inner shifts required if you're going to be able to facilitate breakthrough?

## Thanks for Listening!

**Mitch Simon:** Great. And so thank you. Our last question is where can we find you and Reos Partners?

**Adam Kahane:** It's not very hard. reospartners.com. R-e-o-s Partners, one word, .com.

**Mitch Simon:** Right. And it sounds like you have a newsletter or you have some briefings.

**Adam Kahane:** Yeah, people will find on the website, free downloads of the book, lots of other writing on our work around the world, and a newsletter, and all kinds of exciting stuff.

**Mitch Simon:** Great. Well, Adam, thank you so much, Ginny—

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yes and yeah, no, wonderful. I see this, for myself as a MBA Professor in Leadership, a whole different dimension to add—

**Mitch Simon:** Absolutely.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** To that repertoire, for sure.

**Mitch Simon:** Yeah. Well, great. Thank you, Adam. And thank you Ginny, and thank you to our incredible audience of listeners. And we look forward to seeing you the next time on our next episode of Team Anywhere.