

EP 86 - Rose Fass: Effective Leadership Conversation Techniques

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.

What types of conversations should leaders be having today, especially now that most are remote? According to Rose Fass, there are two purposes in business for a conversation. The first is to reframe the way people see the world and second to move them to action. Everything else is noise.

Today on Team Anywhere our guest is Rose Fass, Founder and CEO of fassforward and author of the upcoming book, "Leadership Conversations: Make Bold Change One Conversation at a Time." Her stories and her wisdom are exactly what you need to be on the leading edge of conversations as you Team Anywhere.

Hello, and welcome to another episode of Team Anywhere. I'm your co-host Mitch Simon on the West Coast, and I've got my amazing, brilliant co-host, Dr. Virginia Bianco-Mathis on the East Coast. And also on the East Coast is our guest today, Rose Fass. Rose Fass just wrote the amazing book, the beautiful book. Here's that book. I've got the first cover sheet, The Leadership Conversation: Make Bold Change One Conversation at a Time"

Welcome Rose.

Rose Fass: Thank you. It's great to be here.

Mitch Simon: It's great to have you on the show. How's everything Ginny?

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Great!

Mitch Simon: All Right. So first of all, Rose, tell us a little bit about yourself. I know you have a very long background in this world of leadership.

Rose Fass: Yeah, I guess I do have a long background. Well, first of all, I'd love to start with saying that I'm 72 years old and spent 50 years in business. What gives people a great deal of peace about that is that we've lived through a lot of difficult times. When I was in college at Boston University, we were dealing with a lot of uprising.

It was the time of Martin Luther King's death. There were lots of things going on. Later, when I joined the workforce, we had the odd and even gas lines and we were going through a massive recession. I then lived through a number of different ones of these recessions. And then when we started fassforward Consulting Group and that was about 21 years ago, it was right before 9/11. So, I've had some pivotal milestones throughout my career, which had been very interesting. And I recognized that while this pandemic has been seriously upending for people, I've lived through a lot of these things. So, I'm happy to say that I'm still here. I'm 70—

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: And we're glad!—

Rose Fass: doing business. So a little bit about me, I started my career as an entrepreneur. And literally launched Mary Quant in 1977 in the United States. She was a London-based designer who invented the miniskirt. And she just wanted to bring out a cosmetic line. And I worked with a gentleman, Jack Winters, who has since passed away, who was amazing. I've written about him in the book. And Jack taught me a lot of things about how one [inaudible] in the world of business back in those days. He was also a very good man.

I remember one time being in a cab and we were rushing to the airport to get to a big account opportunity for us in California, and we were in New York city. And this woman, older woman, was pulled over on East River Drive, and her car had broken down. And Jack made the taxi stopped. And he went out and got the jack out and helped her change her tire. And the cab driver was getting very nervous and things were clicking along, and he jumped in, and he goes, you know, my mother was a hat vendor down in the district. And he goes, she always told me when it's in your power to help someone, you do.

And that kind of leadership is not very visible today. He also taught me that when you're in a negotiation, the first one who talks, loses.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Ohh, interesting.

Rose Fass: And then I guess the last pearl of wisdom from him was no business is better than bad business. That's helped me a lot in starting fassforward 21 years ago. To be choosy, to build a reputation, and to be able to not compromise on our deliverables to our clients. So that's just a little bit about me.

I had a brilliant corporate career after I became an entrepreneur at Xerox. I later became their Chief Transformation Officer. I left there to join Bill McDermott, who's now the CEO of ServiceNow. Was previously the CEO of SAP at Gartner. And that's where I learned how to be a consultant, it gave me a transition. And then I started with a classically trained British Engineer who was 38 at the time, and I was 51, and we started fassforward Consulting, which is pretty much doing the same thing I did as a Chief Transformation Officer throughout my career, which is helping people change the conversation so they can change business.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: All right.

Mitch Simon: That's a great point because a lot of people hear transformation. We've actually had people talk about transformation on this podcast. And I like the way you put it, which is you're changing the conversations that people have. It's almost that simple, you know?

Rose Fass: Yeah.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: So can you talk a bit about that? You have this book that is talking about conversations.

Rose Fass: Yeah. I think people put too little emphasis on conversations. And so, I grew up in an Italian-American family. And what happened around the dinner table kind of shaped who we became and who we were.

My dad was a Marine, World War Two Marine. And he was also a published poet. And he is— was conversant in romance languages. I write about him in the book. And my mom could do more over a cup of tea than most psychiatrists have done in my time. But my dad was conversant in the romance languages. His father never spoke English, was Italian, because dad really felt it was important that people be heard that he could understand them, that he could translate.

And I think at a very young age, I learned how important that was. His one principle that he raised us with: Be up at 0600H ready for company. I'm 72. My older brother is 75. My younger brother's 66. And we are always up at 0600H ready for company. We just grew up that way. So, I mean, I could call my brother right now, put him on this video and you know, if it were six o'clock in the morning, he'd probably be in a white-collared shirt, ready to do.

That covered a lot of bases because my father believed that everybody that came into your home, into your work life, that you pass on the street, the conversation was really important. And it was about understanding them more than what you wanted to get across.

For years I have spent time helping leaders think about the conversations they're having and what those conversations are impacting, both in their business, and professionally with the people that they're working with, clients and employees.

And very interestingly, we've come up, Gavin and I've thought about it, there are two purposes in business for a conversation and that's to reframe the way people see the world and move them to action. Everything else is noise. So if you can't reframe the worldview that someone has in a conversation respectfully, credibly and taking their input into account, no one's going to do anything.

So we're seeing a lot of this today on the public stage. I mean, you can turn on the news and the vitriol that exists on both sides around these conversations are harmful. They're not moving anybody to action. They're actually stymying people and giving them confusion, no clarity, no sense of peace, and no sense of trust in what will happen? What will the future bring? What do I need to pay attention to? What can I weed out?

So it's been my belief, Ginny, and you ask this question, I'm going to answer it honestly, for probably 30 years that our institutions have kind of failed us and they haven't really promoted what I consider to be the level of discourse that I grew up with in my family, which was, listen to everybody's point of view. It'll get deeper and richer if you do rather than shutting down the conversation.

And so, I think business is the last value-added place, where people can help change the conversation and bring out—

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: And preferably around the kitchen table.

Rose Fass: Yes.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Going back to the Italian family, that's all.

Rose Fass: Yes. And even if you're raising your children, we all know, it's very hard to get our points across when we're raising kids, when we're speaking to a spouse, a family member. Dissensions go on for years in families and in business and why? Because something went south with the conversation. So, in my first book, "The Chocolate Conversation," I bring up the whole idea of there are layers to a conversation, which I reiterate in this book, and it's the worldview. It's the way we've been raised. So I'm raised by a guy who says, be up at 0600H and ready for company.

So now if I'm on a zoom call, and I see my people, and they're looking like they're, you know, just rolled out of bed and things aren't put together and whatever, I'm immediately going to a place, which is the next layer of the conversation, my standard, my expectation for how you should look.

And I'm thinking, you know, you're 30. I'm 72. Why can't you get up and put yourself together? I did. And not taking into account is the worldview they've grown up with or the standard that they have, which is presentable for me and we're only on an internal call and whatever's going on, but those layers of worldview. What has informed who you are, how you see the world, which has been impacted by the people you hang out with, the families you grew up in, the teachers and the professors that you've had and the places where you've worked. And your standard then becomes the level or the bar you set for yourself and others.

And from that comes this last layer in the conversation, which is concern. And a lot of leaders will tell me, oh, they came in and threw up all over my desk. I'm so tired of this. And when someone's coming in and expressing a level of frustration, concern, what they're saying to you is I've got an unmet need. Something is not happening here.

And it's our job to get inside of that unmet need and figure out what their worldview is, what standard they had for whatever it is that they're not seeing. And how can we bring some common ground to it? And you can look at CNN, you can look at Fox, you can look at CBS, any of the stations, MSNBC, and you will see the same thing going on. Which is why I listen to NPR because I kind of liked the discourse, you know.

I'm sitting there thinking through this and saying, you know, what could be different about this? How do we interview someone in a way where we're not bringing our biases to the conversation? So, that's kind of what I talk about in

the book. And I build off of the previous book, "The Chocolate Conversation," by getting into ways in which—and real stories about how—when conversations change, and how things change. So I do believe that it happens in the conversation. I believe leadership is a conversation. It happens in the moment. Unlike management, you can't plan for it. And you have to be ready.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Let me jump in then. So I'm a leader, and I'm listening or I'm reading your book. Okay, so how do I do it? I think you and I both know there's some technique to it. There's some things that should happen and not happen.

Rose Fass: Yeah. So one of the key things that I think is so interesting and it's going to sound extremely obvious— asking questions. In a conversation, when you're truly listening, what's the next level of why? so often I'll have a conversation with someone and at first brush, I think I've interpreted but I'm not a hundred percent sure. And most people start talking immediately.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Right.

Rose Fass: So instead of turning to the person and say, say more about that. What informed your thinking? Do you have anything that's gone on in the environment or in the culture or among your people that has caused you to feel this way?

So you get deeper into the conversation where you are both having a conversation, expressing an interest in what the person is thinking behind the words, and possibly getting to a place of solving problems.

So there's a lot to a conversation. It's understanding the worldview, what standards that person has set, what are the concerns they're bringing to the floor, and how do I unpack that? How do I unpack that in a way that's credible, respectful, and genuine? And then how am I human? Even if I don't agree completely, how do I speak to that without making that person feel shut down? So, I will say to someone, can I give you an alternative point of view, rather than, I don't agree with you? How often I hear a [inaudible]. I totally disagree with that. That's a shutdown. So I talk about all of that.

Mitch Simon: You know, I was wondering in this last two years, where many of our meetings and conversations have been over Zoom, like we're doing right now, we're having some emotional difficulties here with this technology. It's difficult enough to have one of the conversations that you're talking about in person. How are you teaching or training or encouraging leaders that you work

with to have these types of conversations that people haven't ever had before over this technology, over Zoom or over Teams?

Rose Fass: So, I hate to answer a question with the technology answer or a response, but we are using unique technologies to create that opportunity. So for example, there are people that are naturally not outward going, and don't speak over Zoom, or aren't the first ones to interact with you. So we have a little thing called Poll EV, which we got ahold of, and we put up things to start with that just on a Zoom call say, how are you feeling? And we have different faces that express that, and we let people rank it.

So even if you're an introvert, you can go in with the technology and you can participate. We use whiteboards, virtual whiteboards where people can type in stickies. And if you're more comfortable with the chat window, you use the chat. And if you're more comfortable coming off speaking, you speak. But we have found that you've got to create an experience virtually that's like being there.

And what it has done, which we've uniquely discovered, is it's allowed the person who doesn't always do the talking to come forward, to be braver. That whole idea of being I'm safe in my home. I've got this technology. I can type it in, and no one's knowing it's me. And I get to say whatever it is that's on my mind. I think conversations, Mitch, to your point, are more important than they've ever been because of this Zoom gloom that everybody's on.

I spoke with a CEO yesterday, one of the CEOs I admire a great deal. And he said, I think it's so important to be human, that we need to share our vulnerability. He said, you know, I'm pretty well off. I live in a beautiful home. I don't have young children anymore. They're out and doing their thing.

And he said, I get up every morning, pretty exhausted, beaten down by this pandemic, tired of being in isolation. I'm only wondering what the rest of my employees feel when they have small kids.

And I said, have you ever expressed that? And he said, I don't think I have. And I said, wouldn't it be lovely on your next Zoom call to share that vulnerability in an all-company meeting. And create the opportunity for people to have that conversation back with you. This is a very good data storage company, and he said, you know, in a world where we don't feel safe, I wanted to provide that peace of mind to my customers, my people, that they can be safe with us. And I thought, what a lovely way to begin a conversation. So, I don't know if that directly answers your question, but I do know—

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: No, it does—

Rose Fass: the use of being human on these Zoom calls.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Right.

Mitch Simon: That's great.

Can you tell us, what you will find, by reading "The Leadership Conversation?" What will you learn as a leader or a soon to be leader by digging into your book?

Rose Fass: So couple of things. I think the one thing before you learn anything is you'll be entertained. Because just in the way you're hearing me talk, the book is very conversational. And it's a book of conversations and stories. My colleague Gavin McMahon who's been my partner for 21 years, my work husband, much like you mentioned, Ginny. He has done this whole series on storytelling and it's been because of our relationship. He didn't start out as a storyteller. My father was a storyteller. I am. So it's a book of stories which allows you to read what is being said to you in the series of stories throughout the book and learn how that might apply in your life and what you might get out of it.

Two things, one, to stay in the question long enough to experience a different narrative and a different personal conversation that you have with yourself because it starts with the conversations we're having with ourselves. In the writing of this book, my husband was diagnosed with Late Onset Parkinson's. Mild case, but it threw him. And the conversation he's been having with himself is not one that's been helpful.

And I've read some passages from the book about how to not allow externals to define you. That's the one thing. We are in an environment where if we allowed it, we could have some pretty horrible conversations with ourselves. There's a story out there that's saying that our country is deteriorating before our eyes, that we no longer have credibility in the world. There's all kinds of things that we could self-define with.

This book speaks to how do you keep your own counsel? How do you stay in the question long enough to form your own point of view? How do you have conversations that are deeper and richer and allow you to change or reframe that negative worldview that's out there?

There are stories in the book that I write about early on. I worked for two women. One was a flamboyant, incredible woman. I was a young assistant buyer at Sachs. She wore hundreds of bracelets, gypsy dresses, and she worked with [inaudible]. And she used to say to me, Rose, the world is open to you. I want you to think big, be creative, and I never got any massive direction from her, but I loved it. And she'd say, go with your gut. Look at all the data, but then let your gut tell you what you need to know. That was Ms. Nan.

And then I worked for Ms. Janet, who were these little DuBose and I worked for them at the same time. She was a process woman. And she would say to me, until you learn the long way home, [inaudible] be able to take short cuts. So learn the long way home. So I had this process guru and I had this creative guru, and between the two of them, it formed what later became Rose.

These two women were amazing. And they were friends. And they could not have been more different. Ms. Janet looked like she stepped out of Central Casting as the schoolmarm or the librarian. And Nan was like a Bohemian. They loved each other and they had a lot of fun and they taught me things that I have kept my whole entire life.

And there's a whole chapter devoted to this on a woman's journey that shares early years with them later with Jack, the guy that changed the flat tire. And then on, through my career. The conversations that we had that changed the conversation for me. There's one story in the book that you'll find funny.

Judy Garland came into May and she wanted to buy a Rosana sweater. She was so emaciated at that point. It was sort of at the end of her career, and she was with some very handsome young guy that you knew was taking advantage of her daughters. I was a young woman and so I see her and she's pulling out in those days there were no size zeros or twos.

And I don't know about you, Ginny, but I love that. Lucy McCarter wears size 12 and sort of neural Monroe and I thought isn't that great.

So I brought her oversized clothes a size six sweater, which was the smallest size we had at the time. She got very indignant. She said, I'm a size 12. She went, and I said, well, you're going to swim in this. And she was like, I'm a size 12. She got very annoyed. She said you were impertinent. I want to see your manager. So I was in college at the time and I was interning and I bring my manager over.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Rose, your stories are incredible. Indeed, you got that gift from your dad. I've been writing down phrases like crazy. You know, don't let the society define you. We can have horrible conversations within ourselves. You got to learn the long way home before you can take shortcuts. These are wonderful.

So something inherent in all that you're saying is also the following. See if you agree. If you're talking or you're reading about this and I'm a leader and you ask questions first and I myself even have a six-page job aid on the best questions that have been collected over the years for leaders.

There is that in patience that you just talked about. Well, you say they don't spend enough time living in the question and that's when the magic happens and getting them to slow down enough. Why should I do that? You know, I'm busy all day long to get a bigger satisfaction, productivity, sense of peace and emotional intelligence from everyone. That's the price. Slow down one second to create that space.

Mitch Simon: We're good. That is a great way to wrap up this episode, which is that leaders are really good in not coming to conclusions. They're really good in asking themselves where their thoughts are coming from and to stay in the question and to be patient.

This has been a really good conversation and we look forward to having you back to just kind of figure out how that book went. And I'm sure for the rest of you, you want to go out on Amazon and maybe reserve this when it launches in April.

Thank you, Rose. Thank you, Ginny. And thank you to our amazing audience. Please share this episode with your friends and colleagues. And we'll see you next time on our next episode of Team Anywhere.