

EP 95 - Mike Kelly: A Leader's Guide to Regaining Employee Engagement

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.

Is the great resignation a result of your employee's inability to stay interested, or a result of your leadership inability to show interest? Are you listening? Are you transparent? Are you unleashing your people? Have you asked yourself how much you care and how you demonstrate that care before determining whether your team member is checked out? Please join Mike Kelly, author of Leaderfluence to learn how today's virtual leaders build connection with their team members 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, where it is beautiful here in San Diego, because it always is. And then my amazing co-host on the East Coast is Dr. Virginia Bianco-Mathis.

Ginny, how are you today?

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Oh, I am great. I wish I had your wonderful weather over here in rainy Washington, D.C. but we'll make this work.

Mitch Simon: All right. Great. Can you introduce us to our illustrious guest?

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Oh, for sure.

I am real happy to introduce Mike Kelly, the Managing Partner of Right Path Enterprises, where he helps clients to improve their ability to lead themselves and others. He has a unique blend of expertise in financial planning, executive coaching and business consulting. The three legs of a perfect stool, right, Mike? Mike leans his expertise through an MBA and through many senior roles with Macy's and Michelin, names that we all know. And he's also the author of a new book that we want to get into, Leaderfluence. And we're thrilled to have you.

Mike Kelly: I am thrilled to be with you. The wonderful introduction and the opportunity to be here today. I wish my weather was as nice as it is out in sunny San Diego. I am in Cincinnati and it's a little cooler here.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yes. As we go across the country for sure.

Well, you have an interesting combination of skills as a financial planner and then also executive coach and leader. You've been able to combine those well. Share with us what is that combination especially in this hybrid and virtual world?

Mike Kelly: In a hybrid and virtual world, it's amazing how things have changed over the last couple of years for us all. In many respects, money integrates all aspects of life. It's so easy to forget that, but it does. And oftentimes it causes a certain level of fear. Oftentimes it also influences us in ways that we might not even be aware of. I actually as you said, a coach and a consultant. As an executive coach, I have found that money often underpins some of the issues that we find, that I find as I'm working with my clients. Either they are afraid, they are distracted, and they are not leading in a way that is.

It's a good indicator of what they're capable of doing because of money. Either they're spending too much, they don't know what they have and as a result of that, they are operating out of fear and affected at work. So, for me, I realized that over the years as an executive and I decided to become a Certified Financial Planner.

And just quick story on how that has worked for me. I have a client. She's an executive. Very talented person. Very skilled. Unique skillset. Working in a job that she loved. She reached out to me for a financial plan. We completed the financial plan, did all the work that was required there. But as part of that process, I asked about her goals. And she had a goal of leaving the job that she was in at some point, not sure where she was going to go.

We finished the financial plan. It was great. She was in a wonderful situation. She had a pretty good picture of where she was headed from a financial standpoint based on a projection. She reached out to me later and asked me what I coach her with respect to her work. I knew where she stood financially.

So, it made the coaching a lot easier. Over a two-year period of time, we were able to coach her out of her job into something that aligns better with her purpose. And what she liked to be doing in her life at this stage. That is just one example of how it's worked together.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Oh, I love it. And you spoke to me about strengthening the core. It helps you do that whole person of the leader. And also, I would suspect helps you with talking about the finances of the organization as they're looking at this or that.

Mike Kelly: It really does. It takes away that fear. And if I'm doing the right things with my money, then I can take more risks at work. Then maybe I can challenge the status quo. Maybe I can be a little bit more innovative, creative, and fail. Understanding that I'm okay if it doesn't work out. That's another thing that I've found that —

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: with entrepreneurs, right? —

Mike Kelly: Entrepreneurs—

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Definitely.

Mike Kelly: Absolutely. And also people working in organizations, you're more courageous and you have more joy in your work.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yes. All right. So now you're going to move on and you were working with many big companies in your past that brought you to this place. What were you learning by experiencing all those leaders that then led you to writing your book *Leaderfluence*?

And by the way, is that how you pronounce it? You're the writer of the book.

Mike Kelly: That is exactly how I pronounce it.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: All right. Terrific. Okay.

Mike Kelly: Yes. Sequence of leadership essential to effectively leading yourself and positively influencing others. My own story actually led me to writing a book and my story entailed hitting a wall at one point in my career at Michelin. I was working hard on my job and I was working on myself and I burnt myself out. It wasn't good. I loved the work but I wasn't working on the things that were important my health, my family relationships, managing my money well, you know, all those things. And I wasn't a very good leader because of that, because I was preoccupied.

I was tired and I realized that in order for me to be the best leader I could be not only at work, but in all areas of life I needed to do what Jim Rome says, work harder on yourself than you do on your job. You're going to work hard on your job as well but you got to work hard on yourself and change my life. So, the book really talks about taking more of a strategic approach to life beginning with the end in mind.

What does that vision, what does that picture of what you'd like to see? And how do you begin painting that picture today? Thinking about those priority areas of life and that's what the book's all about. And that's a little bit of my story and almost was a little bit of the story of a number of people that I've had an opportunity to connect with them on with.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: But then you extend that and how do you then positively influence others? So, what are some of those secrets? And now, especially in this hybrid-virtual world.

Mike Kelly: Yeah. COVID has changed a lot but there are some things that remain the same. And one of those things is respecting people, carving out time to engage people. And when you're with people, being with them, listening with energy and emotion which is something that I found to be so important.

And virtually, it certainly makes it hard when you are online, your virtual, digital type of interactions. But if you're authentic in my opinion, that actually converts. So, really caring and the listening piece is a very important piece of this whole puzzle. But to listen, you've got to have control of your time because when you start listening to people, it does take time. Of course, can be tremendous because you get to know them. And that allows you then to motivate, inspire support, encourage in a way that motivates them to do that be the best version of themselves and perform at a high level at work. And enjoy the work.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yeah. So, when you're dealing with a leader now and you say to them, yeah, you're now have to lead virtually or with a hybrid, and you're going to have to listen more. And they go, well, that's going to take more time. How do you convince them to take that journey?

Mike Kelly: We start by getting feedback on how things are working now. What is getting in the way of you listening well? What are people saying? I take them through a series of assessments. We get feedback from those assessments then I talked to people around them. They hear what people are saying. That story, that information that we get is real.

This is how it is showing up. And when people really understand how they're impacting others, it tends to get their attention. Then they're willing to plan and take steps necessary to change behavior. Because most of us are good people, we want to do what's right. But you got to get clear on what the current state is before you can move forward. And that's what we spend the bulk of our time, especially early on in my engagements with people.

Mitch Simon: Mike, what does get in the way of people listening well? What has been your experience?

Mike Kelly: Virtually making sure that you are not distracted. Making sure that your phone is off. Making sure that you are looking at people, looking at the camera lens. Making sure that you are engaged. So, you're actively asking questions, paraphrasing. Those types of things to me are really important in bringing energy and emotion. Active listening. And you can do that even on a virtual call.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: I love what you're saying. And those of us that have been in the field a long time have been saying this forever. So, the leader can sit there and go, okay. Yeah. All right. How do you help the leader actually start doing it?

Mike Kelly: Well, you helped the leader actually start doing it by building a plan. Everyone's different. But some people you have to actually develop steps that you should take when you're with someone in order for you to really be effective.

And if you are on a call with multiple people, allow someone to serve as an accountability partner. At the end of the call. At the end of the meeting. How did you do with this or that? Accountability feedback is a gift and it's something

that we all need. And I find that one of the great ways to improve my ability to listen, be involved, be engaged, and to make an impact in meetings.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: I like that concept to building in an accountability partner. So, we're going into this meeting. I'm going to try these three things. I'm going to ask you for feedback at the end. That is incredibly powerful. Convincing some leaders to do that sometimes they'll let me do it as their coach for a little bit, which now quite frankly is easier, right? If it's virtual. Because no one would even know you're there. And you could come back and give that person feedback.

Mitch Simon: A question on feedback especially in this environment. So Mike, you know, let's just pretend a real situation. You might be my leader for about a year or two, and I might never have met you before in person. What type of feedback do you give such that I know that you truly care?

Some people would say, you should be kind, you should be compassionate, you should be rigorous, you know? How do I know that you really care about me? What type of feedback and how do you give it so that I know that this leader on the other side of the world, or in Cincinnati actually does care about me?

Mike Kelly: Well, it takes creating an environment where people are comfortable with you and with a new leader, that's hard. So, number one, you invest the time in my opinion, a couple of things you can do. You invest the time upfront in getting to know people. Coming in new, that's a great opportunity to schedule meetings just to touch base with people, to ask them questions, and to listen. Once you build those relationships, it's much easier to get feedback. One of the things that is challenging is providing feedback to someone and you don't know them.

Right away, they resist. Investing time and getting to know people and I consider it a true investment. Makes it easier when you have to tell them things that can be helpful to them. And the other thing I feel is important is sharing with people what's in it for them. Why is it important to understand how the way that you are interacting with others for example, is impacting them and also impacting you the way that you review. By changing, you're able to have a greater impact on these individuals in our organization.

But they will have a greater impact as well. But just thinking about what's in it for them and sharing that with them as well. But I would say having a relationship with people and creating an environment or a culture where people

want feedback and crave feedback is so important. But it takes time and it is an investment.

Mitch Simon: You know, what I love Mike is all the books written before the pandemic was, you know, first 90 days you're supposed to just walk around, meet everybody. So, it sounds like what you're saying, Mike is you got to Zoom around.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: That's correct!

Mike Kelly: Absolutely. And in my financial planning practice, my coaching-consulting practice. All of my work across the country is virtual right now. And many of us have gone to that. And I agree with you Zooming for the first 90 days, first 6 months. When I joined Macy's, that was well before COVID the first 120 days. All I did was listening to people, I met with people, I listened, I got to know people. The level of trust that carried over, and that was helpful. Certainly, it's not as convenient on being virtual or the same principles do apply.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Well, since I do know you a little bit from having consulted with you, you do something virtually 'cause all our conversations at first were virtual before I showed up on Macy's doorstep. You are not afraid to discuss what needs to be discussed and what that does is build trust.

Now let's talk about something that might be sensitive, or let me really share with you what's going on in the background. You made that safe, right? That was cool. These leaders need to put themselves in the shoes of all these people they're Zooming around with.

Mike Kelly: You just pumped my thinking on something, Ginny. Even before COVID, I had a team, I was in Cincinnati, but I had a team in St. Louis, Phoenix, and Tampa. A lot of our work was virtual even before COVID. So, I was engaging people, new people on the team, spending time with them, virtually. Getting to know them and on the phone. So, then we had to have those difficult conversations. It was a little bit more comfortable for us, both.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Like anything else, the more you do it— and this is how I deal with the leaders is the more you walk them through it, right? First you get them to think about it, then you role play it. Then you give them a script you know, sometimes a lot of that handholding to then role model. And a reminder, just like in any kind of regular coaching relationship, you know, how did you get good at playing tennis? Did you just wake up? All right. Go, play. It has to take practice.

Well, you use a term in your book that I really like which is a leader needs to recognize past conditioning and don't live in a box. So, what did you mean by that?

Mike Kelly: We come to the table with our experiences as children, for example, school, family, friends, church, and ultimately the workplace we developed this way of seeing the world.

We developed these habits and behaviors that were not even aware of. And it gets back to our feedback conversation. Some of them are great. Some of them are wonderful, but many of them can be detrimental. We don't have someone come along beside us and help us realize that we are conditioned and help us change then we can do a lot of damage.

As a coach and also the financial planner in many respects, we can play a role in helping people recognize conditioning, recognize that they're in a box. And develop a plan, a strategy to get out of that box. And I've been in boxes at different points in my life. I'm in boxes sometimes today.

Being a person who's willing to support others and recognizing, and finding a way to break their own.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yeah. you keep saying this and I think it is powerful if we look at it with a stronger frame. The feedback, the holding up the mirror is so important because otherwise nothing changes. And creating an entire feedback culture is a fascinating notion where we just need to keep, this is what you do. I remember there was a tool that you could buy and you were supposed to use it on a very regular basis and you shoot it out to three or four people. You're at the meeting today. Give me a 1, 2, 3.

You're on the phone conference call with me, give me a 1, 2, 3. So, this very constant instant feedback, that's just one example. But the use of tools can perhaps ease that because the mindset talk about habit tends to be, oh, that's a difficult conversation.

Mike Kelly: Exactly. It is what we know and it can be difficult. One example for me was early in my career. My first job out of college was in a textile manufacturing plant as a supervisor. It was a very autocratic environment. You were in that environment; you were expected to lower the hammer on people and that's what everyone did. I came in with a totally different mentality, having studied participative leadership and based on my own personal values, I felt that people matter. There was a conflict, even conflict with the person I reported to.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: He thought, or she thought you were too weak, didn't they?

Mike Kelly: I was too weak until the person yelled at me one day. And I said to them, you've got five seconds to get out of my face or you got to get up off the floor. They ran back to their office and told others about it, his boss, and a few others.

The next day I was called into a meeting and I was asked, why did you do this? Because we were so conditioned in the environment and no one even recognized that was wrong. I said, I felt disrespected. And if he's going to speak to me in general, it's going to be one man talking to another. And if he can't do that, you guys can do whatever you want. 'Cause he's not going to talk but it caused a pause there.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yes. Cool, that's another lovely phrase. Cause as many pauses as you can.

Mike Kelly: Yes. And it led to some wonderful things. I don't take credit for that. But at some point, we got to recognize our conditioning and we don't want it to get to that point.

So for me, it's being transparent, being honest, being authentic, doing it with care. And encouraging those I have the opportunity to partner with, to do the same. But doing it in a way where you're helping as opposed to analyzing someone.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: You also talk about make sure your real self emerges because you can't hide. Can you share a little more about that?

Mike Kelly: Yes. You've got to be who you are. I feel that is so important. As part of that conditioning, we all come to table with our own biases, and we live in an era now where we are judging people based on their race, their ethnicity, their gender, and all these things.

And bias is not good. This is not good. And if people know that you're judging them that way and they're depending on you for a paycheck. What is that?

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yeah.

Mike Kelly: We want people bringing their whole selves to work and in order for them to be able to do that, I've got to recognize my own conditioning and

my biases and my challenges. And I've got to change. People need to be unleashed. There are many around this country and we all know this, and I'd love to get your thoughts on this who have quit and they're still on the payroll.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Oh yeah.

Mike Kelly: Show up every day they do just enough to get by. The cost of [inaudible] it shows data with that is tremendous. So, we want people unleashed and as leaders, we have the opportunity and that's what I consider it to lead in that way.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yes. Now, what do you do? You bring up a very interesting scenario. So, I'm a leader I'm trying to incorporate these kinds of values and new behaviors and I now sense that someone is retired in place. What do I do? You know, they're in Timbuktu.

Mike Kelly: Yeah.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: How do I handle that situation?

Mike Kelly: The first thing that I would say is make sure that you are correct because your judgment could not be correct, especially with the distance thing. So, you want to do some investigative work and that might require assessing the person's performance by having conversations with this individual virtually or over the phone and engaging people who are 'round this individual, taking a look at the results of this individuals producing. If all of that then comes back to say, okay, this person has really checked out.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: There we go much better word—

Mike Kelly: Then you have enough information to begin the process of having counseling or coaching conversations with individual around what you're seeing and hearing.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Right.

Mike Kelly: Number one, we have to start with making sure that my assessment is right. I've been known to make the wrong assessments and being virtual is easy to do.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: That's our point. And then that might also lead to other infrastructures that need to be put in place for connection and engagement.

Mike Kelly: Right. And also, Ginny, there may be opportunities to get feedback from this individual and things that I can do as a leader to better engage them.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Oh, there you go. I think you hit the nail on the head on that one. Oh, I love that. What could I have done more of, or less of, that would have perhaps helped you be on a different path? That is good.

Mitch Simon: Mike, I'm really talking about the great resignation, which I'm sure you've heard of, and what you're pointing out is the great resignation—a lot of it is being driven by really bad leaders, right? And I just love your immediate response to Ginny's question is first thing I do is check it out. I just think that so many of us, you know, we'll go in the old mind of your training, which was horrible, 'cause you know, just yell at people.

And I have an employee who is not delivering results seems to be quote-unquote, checked out. I really have a responsibility as a leader to figure out what am I doing? Such that the person has checked out. If in fact he is, or she has checked out, it goes back to as I'm sure Mike, you'd say, we'll see step one, which is, are you really listening?

Are you really getting feedback? Are you really connecting? Because we do have to realize how difficult it is today to connect as a leader because it is virtual and how much more effort we need to put into it to make sure that we as leaders are paving the way, staying curious, really caring for, I was wondering if you wanted to share any thoughts about that?

Mike Kelly: Before COVID hit, we were in a leadership crisis. It's been there for years now with this hybrid model that we are all in, it is even more of a problem. I think is revealing itself in more pronounced ways. Again, I'll go back to the general quote. Work harder on yourself than you do your job.

Listening to your podcasts, reading good books, finding a mentor, talking to people, taking advantage of the many online resources that your organization probably offers. If they don't, go to YouTube. Go to some of these other forums where you can find information. Some of the greatest leaders that I've had an opportunity to meet and work with, they had growth mindset.

They were willing to do that work to be better leaders of people. That is more important now than ever. And we are getting a lot of great resources now that talk about leading in a virtual world compared to what we had previously. Taking the time to invest in those. And if you have clients, your coach, or our

manager, encouraging others to do the same thing. And getting together and talking about what you're learning can be really helpful.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Oh, I love that last one, creating the forum at which a lot of leadership programs now have turned to in the last two years. Leaders sharing and being vulnerable with one another. I don't know if the two of you have had this experience. I remember some of the old day stuff. I'm old enough to remember where you'd sit around and they're still trying to flex their muscles with one another.

There was no real sharing of learning happening there. That shift has really changed. Has it not in terms of books like yours in terms of other people we have had on the podcast about? A shift to looking at yourself because you're the one who was influenced thus, the name of your book, right? That was not planned. You know, at someone's outset on this podcast, you're not a good leader until someone tells you are. And I just thought that was beautiful.

Mike Kelly: Yes. We get into trouble when we start reading our own press clippings. A humble leader is an effective leader in my opinion. You have power, but you don't necessarily have to use it because people work for you because they know they care.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Oh, I love it.

Mike Kelly: They're inspired. They're engaged. They'll do the job and the power yes, I have it. It is inherent in my role. One of the challenges that I've seen in my work previously, and even now the higher leader goes in an organization. The more people tells them what they think they need to hear. And I've actually had a COO of a major organization tell me this. It is hard for me. I have to really work hard to create a culture where people are telling me what I need to hear, what they think I want to hear. He said I really value people who are willing to do that for me, but it's not easy.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: I like that. That's a crucial twist is it not? Hey, I'm a leader, right? Okay. I like this. I want this. But they won't tell me the truth now. Okay. So, what are some things now you're going to have to do that helps a slightly different lens to help them get to that point.

Mike Kelly: One of those things was being transparent. I have failed. I struggle in this area. And I need your help.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: There you go. I need your help.

Mike Kelly: I need your help.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: That is beautiful. Well, this has been wonderful. I love your advice. You come off as a sage, right? I'm going to go talk to Mike Kelly. He makes me feel calm.

That's wonderful. Mike, how can our audience get in touch with you?

Mike Kelly: Yes, I'm on all the social media platforms. So, you can find me there. But you can also find me at Right Path Enterprises. Take the right path, rightpathenterprises.com. And there's a tab there for a link to the landing page Leaderfluence. And also, you can find me at kellyfinancialplanning.com

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Fabulous. Mitch.

Mitch Simon: Thank you so much, Mike. Wow. A coach. A leader. A financial planner. What else do you do, Mike?

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Certified exercise person.

Mike Kelly: I'm a registered life planner. We didn't talk about that, but —

Mitch Simon: We'll get them the next time.

Mike Kelly: Thank you both for having me. I just want to say that.

Mitch Simon: This has been a great segment on just like really good questions to ask yourself as a leader. Like, you know, are you being transparent? Are you really not letting your biases get in your way? Are you're really making a connection? It's really a good way to kind of look at yourself first before you address the other people on your team, who you might have all these ideas around. So, I think it's a really good check-in for ourselves. And then of course, what to do to really be a great virtual leader.

So, I want to thank you so much, Mike. I want to thank you so much, Ginny for doing a great job with the questions. And I want to thank you guys and our gals, our audience who comes here every week to listen to these really great insights at Team Anywhere. So, we look forward to seeing you on our next episode, but until then have a great day, have a great evening. And we'll talk to you later. Bye-bye.