

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - FIONA CAMERON (Katie Elliott & Fiona Cameron)

On today's show it's my pleasure to welcome Fiona Cameron, co-founder and director of Sticky Change, a company that inspires organisations and people to do things differently. Fiona regularly travels all around the globe to work with a wide variety of clients as a coach, trainer and consultant.

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Hello, Fiona Cameron - thank you for joining me.

You're very welcome, Katie.

Would you mind letting us all know a little bit about what you do and what you're excited about?

So Sticky Change was set up about 15 years ago and our name clearly demonstrates what we're about, which is about helping organisations make change stick and helping people to do things differently so that they can be more effective. Our client base is very varied and what we do is we deliver training, we do one-to-one coaching and we do consulting around change, culture and values.

So I'm really interested in the idea of change and why it is that we can often have so much resistance to it -because it tends to bring up a lot of stuff for people, doesn't it? What do you notice when people are working in an organisation and the organisation wants to create some sort of major change? What are the kind of responses that you see from the people who feel that they're having that imposed upon them?

Well, it goes back to neuroscience really because our brains are programmed to assume the worst. If we hadn't assumed the worst when we were cave dwellers and moved up onto two feet, we would have been killed by the sabre-toothed tiger that came around the corner. So our brains haven't really developed much since we were cave dwellers. And we're very good at assuming the worst. So that's often where resistance comes from. People will just assume the worst as a result of change and therefore will be resistant to it. And it takes quite a lot of effort on the part of the organisation to manage those natural reactions and not many organisations, you know, manage that as effectively as they could do.

Is that a kind of negativity bias that we've evolved to have to keep ourselves safe?

Yes. Clearly there are some people in the world who are very positive. I've got one of my clients who's the most positive person around, but she must have had a very, very positive upbringing because most of us will have that immediate reaction and look for the negatives.

Mm. But I think sometimes we assume the worst and we think that that's realistic. Does it help when you explain to people that we do have that negativity bias and that perhaps we need to take that into consideration? That our responses are maybe not fair and balanced?

Absolutely. So when we deliver change management training with managers, we're often talking about "This is the natural reaction you're going to get from people. You need to expect it and you need to challenge them to look at what actually is the evidence? So what really is going on here? Let's be, let's be really honest." And also that means the managers should be really, really honest with their people and not try and massage bad news, but be very straightforward about it because actually when people know what the reality is, they can start to deal with it.

Yeah. So you help other people to manage change within organisations and groups. How has what you've learned had an impact on how you manage change in your own life? What do you know that makes it easier for you to change?

Oh my goodness, that's a good question. I think just doing the reading and the job that I do definitely helps me understand what's going on for myself and helps me to notice when I'm reacting in a way that's not helpful and to challenge myself to look at it differently.

Yeah. The thing I've been noticing with work around change for myself and others is that the greater the degree of self awareness, the more we kind of recognise our patterns and our behaviours and our tendencies, the easier it is to change things. If you don't have insight into what's driving you, it can be very difficult actually to create any kind of sustainable change.

Yeah, I think that's completely true. So quite a lot of what work we do is about self awareness and we often work with teams helping them to be much more aware of themselves and of each other. And I think that self awareness piece is a critical part of the journey. Getting people to know what's going on for themselves in order to accept what's going on around them.

Yeah. So when you're working with groups of people, in order for them to be able to make change in their work, they need to be in a good place, don't they? They need to be well-resourced and psychologically and physically healthy. So what

have you learned about what helps to put people into a state where they are ready and able to embrace change?

So one of the programs we do is called 'Managing your energy' and we talk about four specific things. One is your physical energy and the second is your emotional energy. The third is your mental energy and the fourth - don't really like using this phrase, but - spiritual energy when we're talking about aligning your purpose. And we've designed a questionnaire that helps people assess where they are against those four energies. And starting with the physical energy, we talk a lot about the food that they eat, the exercise they do, but also sleep and how critical sleep is. And I think there's a recognition that actually we have really underestimated the importance of getting a good night's sleep in terms of maintaining your resilience and your ability to function effectively.

Yeah, and I don't know about you, but I'm often reading things online and there can be a lot of very self-congratulatory articles about getting up at 5:00 AM or managing on very little sleep and being super-productive, which I personally don't always find helpful because I love the idea of being super-productive but not at the expense of my health.

There's an absolutely brilliant book come out recently called 'Why we sleep' by Matthew Walker - highly researched, evidence-based material. And the research says that actually if we're not getting seven to eight hours sleep a night, we are actually really in danger of affecting our health. And people who work on very little sleep actually are in a space of what's called TATT, tired all the time. So they're not making their best decisions. And a lot of senior people in organisations who literally are surviving on being tired all the time and therefore their decision making is not as good as it could be. And I think some organisations are starting to appreciate that. You know, I have seen recently a number of organisations who are starting to understand the importance of sleep and actually allowing people to have power naps and that sort of thing because they realise how significant it is.

But if you have a lot of people in senior roles who are tired all the time and may or may not realise that they are, because I don't think we always notice when we're sort of chronically sleep deprived, that also sends out a very powerful message to everyone else, doesn't it?

Yep.

So presumably you have to work with those people who are in the position of making decisions and influencing the company culture first so that it can influence

others. Because otherwise it's hard to tell people they need lots of sleep if they're looking at senior figures in their organisation who are not sleeping.

Yes. And I think buying everybody the book and making them read it is a good starting point because I think when I first read the first page, I sort of shut the book and put it away, I thought, "I don't want to read this because actually it's really scary". Because what the research says is if you're sleeping less than six to seven hours a night you demolish your immune system, you double your risk of cancer, you've increased your risk of Alzheimer's, you're increasing your risk of cardiovascular disease, strokes, heart failure. So I think getting that message across to senior people can be really helpful cause then they realise there's a real consequence for them carrying on behaving like that. I think the other thing I'd say is I was doing a two day workshop last week in a company where the culture was really not very supportive and we spent a lot of time talking about asking for forgiveness rather than asking permission and encouraging them to be a bit disruptive in terms of, you know, protecting the people that work for them and being prepared to look after them in a different way than they themselves get looked after.

Mm. It's tough though, isn't it, because there's that kind of fear of missing out thing, that fear of falling behind and it takes courage to say, I'm going to prioritise my own wellbeing. I'm going to take time out of my working day for mindfulness or to go for a walk in the fresh air or I'm going to stop checking my email at a certain point in the evening. I'm not going to be constantly on call and responsive. That fear that somehow the world will overtake you...

Absolutely, and you know the conversation I was having in the group, there was 15 people on the course. You've got an ability, the group of you, do something different. So if all of you started doing something different, if all of you pushed back, you've got lot more ower than if one person does it on their own, so use each other to help to challenge some of the pervading unhelpful cultures in the organisation.

Yes. Yes, I can see you could get to a tipping point where culturally the normal thing to do was to take good care of yourself, but if you're one of the people who's trying to initiate that change and that means that you're spending less time at work or you appear not to be contributing as much, although we know don't we, that actually when you do take a break, all the evidence shows that we tend to do better work. We think more creatively. There are countless benefits.

Yes, there was a study done some time ago called 'Manage your energy, not your time'. I think Harvard Business Review published it and they absolutely

demonstrated that with two groups of salespeople and the team that were actually managing their energy effectively were getting better results than the team that weren't. So if you make sure you have the breaks, make sure you stop, make sure you get your sleep, you will be much more productive.

So in a really practical sense, we can know those things intellectually. We can even read the evidence that says we're going to do a better job, we're going to function better as human beings in whatever capacity if we get good sleep and we're relaxing and we're taking time out. But the reality of putting that into place, because one of the things that I've noticed about stress is the more stressed you get, the more you think you should be trying harder.

Yeah.

So the idea of actually relaxing, resting, sleeping is counter-intuitive at that point when you are already chronically stressed. Do you have any tips for people to help them step out of that stress state where they feel like they really need to be working hard right now, otherwise everything's going to fall apart? Because, actually, stepping out of that state is the really difficult part, isn't it?

Yes. And I don't think there's an easy answer to that one. I mean, we do a lot of one-to-one coaching and certainly I can think of one person that I'm coaching at the moment and having the conversation with her about the severity of lack of sleep has really helped her to go, "Okay, I really need to do something about this". And I think that's one of the big advantages of the book in terms of reading and helping people see how critical it is for your long term health. That does really grab people's attention and help them realise that actually they're not functioning at their best. But as you said earlier, helping just people understand what's going on for them from a neuroscience perspective can really help.

And it's taking it from being an intellectual understanding to being a pattern of behaving. The thing that I've found challenging around changing my own behaviour is that for years people were telling me things about how to be healthy and I'd say, "Yes, I know that". Because I did know that, but that didn't mean that I was doing that. And learning how to change behaviour - that's almost kind of independent of the intellectual understanding - does that make sense?

Yeah. And there you're into the whole space of actually how do we create habits and why do we create habits? So again there's neuroscience to that, which is that habits mean that we're spending less energy in our brain - the neural pathway goes very quickly through your brain. And actually to change a habit is quite hard because you're actually trying to potentially get rid of an old habit and start a new

one. So there's a whole range of things that you can think about in terms of helping people change habits, which would include having a buddy, linking into another habit... So for example, when I started trying to do some more jogging and I'd walk the kids up to the bus stop in the mornings to go to school, I then just carried on and went for a jog at the same time. So it's easier to link one habit to another. Um, just making things easier for yourself. So when we talk about managing your energies, things like, you know, you're in work, you need to go to the toilet, don't go to the toilet on the same floor, go down the stairs or up the stairs to the next floor. It means that you're away from your desk a bit more. You're having a bit more of a break and you're using your legs to do some exercise, but the whole piece around habit change, the big thing about that is you need to sustain the new ways of doing things in order to create a new habit. Habits don't happen quickly. You need to have that sustained repetition in order to create a different way of doing things.

Yes. One of my favourites is temptation bundling, actually. I really like that one. I was talking to my teenage son about it yesterday. The idea that you take something you don't like to do, but that you need to do and something that you really look forward to doing and then you only allow yourself to do the two things at the same time.

Yes. Or have your to do list and start with the thing that you like least so that the thing you do next is preferable to the one that you've just done.

One thing that I'm finding quite useful at the moment in terms of trying to make sure that I don't go too far down that stress state - we were talking earlier about the fact that when you are very stressed then it can be harder and harder to take time off and do the thing that you know you need to do, but it feels impossible increasingly to do that. I'm a great fan of using timers. I don't know if you ever use timers, but I really like to sort of interrupt myself...

Yeah.

...whilst working. So if I'm doing the kind of job that can turn into a massive undertaking and I can really get drawn into it and quite stressed whilst doing it, I may well just set a timer for a certain period of time, maybe 25 minutes, whatever it might be, that will interrupt me and say, you're going to break that state just for a moment before you go back to it. And I'm finding that quite helpful. Have you, have you done any work using time-limited chunks.

Yeah. And you know one of the things that can really stop people's productivity if they just try and work on something for two or three hours at a time. So again,

when we're talking about managing your effectiveness, we would say the same thing. Just maybe do even an hour, but after that, stop yourself and go and do something else. The danger is when people get interrupted when they're in their flow, but when you're doing it for yourself, it's much more effective, you say, "Right, okay, I'll give myself an hour, I will stop, then I'll get up, I'll move around, go get myself a cup of coffee" or whatever, but just to break that state and give your brain a bit of a release. And even things like actually trying to look out the window to get more perspective. I mean that just is good for your eyes if nothing else as opposed to constantly looking at a screen. So finding ways to help yourself be more effective overall or having breaks is really important.

Yes. Cos there's a massive amount of processing that goes on in the background in our minds, isn't there? It's difficult for our minds to do that when we're consciously plugging away at trying to solve a particular problem or achieve an outcome, but when we just let them relax for a bit, they are, they are remarkably good at pulling connections together, I think.

Yeah. One of the things we often say to people, "So where, where'd you get your best ideas?" And I don't think anyone has ever answered, when I'm sitting in front of my laptop.

Where do you get your best ideas, Fiona?

When I go out for walks with my dog. Yeah. And just having that open space cos I live out in the country and I can go up a hill. And it's that ability, as you said, for your brain just to pull stuff together. I mean, they can't create a computer that's as good as our brains - yet. But the ability to synthesise material and come up with something, it doesn't happen when you're sitting staring at a screen. Mostly.

Indeed, yes. So Fiona, do you have a 'Little Challenge' for us?

Yes. My challenge is to get at least seven hours sleep a night. And that doesn't mean you're in bed for seven hours because we differentiate between sleep opportunity and sleep. So I have a Fitbit and last night, for example, I went to bed at quarter to 10 and I woke up at quarter to seven. So in theory that was nine hours, but I actually slept for seven hours and 50 minutes. So we think that we're in bed and we're sleeping for the full period. But actually we keep waking up. So challenge yourself to go to bed, probably go to bed earlier - that's certainly the case with most of my clients - and attempt to get at least seven hours of sleep on a regular basis.

That's a lovely one. We haven't had that one before. Thank you for that, Fiona. If people would like to know more about you and about Sticky Change, where can they find you?

Our website is stickychange.com so it's very easy to find us, so go and check out the website and yes, very happy to talk to anybody really.

That's wonderful. Thank you so much.

You're very welcome.