

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - ERICA MOHR

(Katie Elliott & Erica Mohr)

My guest today has decades of experience of leading teams, designing and implementing large-scale leadership development programs and supporting one-on-one coaching clients. Erica Mohr is a former United States Coast Guard officer, she's the Executive Director of a non-profit working on poverty alleviation and the founder of leadership development company, Be Mohr.

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Erica Mohr - thank you for joining me today. I'm so pleased to talk with you.

Oh, it's my pleasure to be here, Katie. Thank you for having me.

Could you give us a brief introduction, if that's possible, to some of the things that you're up to?

Sure, I'll try and keep it brief! I have founded my own business called Be Mohr, doing work helping individuals and organisations grow in their leadership development journeys. But most recently I spent almost two years as the Executive Director for a nonprofit working out of Tanzania - it's called the Sasamani Foundation - and as part of that, I built a 'Women Leading Change' course in collaboration with the University of Dar es Salaam and an international team around the world, and that was very rewarding work. And before that I spent 24 years, as I like to say, wearing polyester in the United States Coast Guard and did a lot of leadership development work there as well.

Was it the polyester that first attracted you to the role, or...?

Despite of, it turns out...

So, as a young person, what was it that drew you to that in the first place?

I mean, I think the short answer is it was a way to pay for college. The Coast Guard Academy is a free education, a very good four year bachelor's degree. But I think what kept me in was really the people and the humanitarian mission. It's a tremendous group of people. And when you work on a team who has true commitment to a mission that's larger than themselves, that's a pretty great feeling and something that's hard to leave.

I can imagine. So what prompted you to move on from that role?

I think it was more of moving towards something else. During my service, I had taken most of my leave to travel and volunteer internationally and so that really was something that I had been excited about being able to do full time. And then also I had earned a

coaching credential and was really excited about the potential for coaching. And so I wanted to be able to do that full time.

You have a particular interest in women in leadership - would that be fair to say?

That's fair to say. Yes.

Yeah. And what do you see as being particular challenges that face women wherever they might be in the world?

You know, my thesis in Grad School was actually in the 'confidence gap' in women. Psychologists call that construct 'self-efficacy', but we know it as 'confidence'. So, without fail, men overestimate their leadership impact and women underestimate their leadership impact. And that just breaks my heart, to see someone who is constantly underselling their value to society. And I really am inspired to be part of shifting that for myself and others.

I imagine, you know, there are many conversations to be had about why that might be the case, but I guess I'm more interested in how can we change that. What do you see as being helpful in supporting women to feel more confident?

Yeah, so one of the things that does bear out in the self-efficacy research is women, in particular, do respond to someone in a position of power, a mentor, someone they really respect voicing their expectation in the woman succeeding. So if a boss says, you know, "You've got this, don't worry about it, you're going to be amazing in this role". Women particularly respond to that type of increase in self-efficacy. And how we can support each other as well, I think women respond to that communal support, which is something we really made sure was present in the 'Women Leading Change' program and I am still in contact with all of the initial pilot graduates on a WhatsApp channel and somebody just posted this morning. So supportive climates really matter for women.

Yeah, something that I found really important - as a woman who's been trying to develop a bit more confidence, because I think it would be reasonable to say that I might've looked really confident, but I haven't felt it, certainly for an awful lot of my life - and something that's been really important for me is to see other women doing things that I really would love to be able to do but maybe haven't felt that I was going to be able to do. So actually being able to see people in those roles, and there have been some sort of key figure who I will always feel grateful to for providing that example, but kind of providing that hope, actually that that was something that I might be able to grow into one day. Is that something that's important - having role models?

Absolutely. And it's also important in particular with those role models that women see them struggle as well. So I don't think we do any service to folks when we put people on pedestals and make it seem like they were just born this talented. I think it's much more effective when we can communicate how the people we look up to stumbled, fell, pick themselves up. And that's why I love your video so much, Katie, because you're so real and honest about what your journey has been. I actually am teaching a class around

growth mindset and the phrase I like to use when teaching that is 'the myth of talent'. So we have such a myth of talent in American culture and I think that's probably fair to say in the UK as well, right? Michael Jordan didn't make his high school basketball team. And so the people who succeed, like Michael Jordan, they have succeeded because they practice to get better, they don't just go out there. (And it's called deliberate practice - it's also a construct you can study.) So they are constantly getting feedback and they're working on their game and they're really obsessed with improving in that skill. It's not just a magic wand that comes out and says you're blessed at birth, you know, to be Michael Jordan. Now if Michael Jordan was five foot tall, he would not be what we know today, right? So there are some limitations certainly that come with the way that we're brought into the world. But I think we have a lot more control over that than we give ourselves credit in the lore and the things that we popularise on social media or, you know, within Hollywood.

Yeah, I did briefly get very excited then 'cause I'm five foot five and a half and I really like playing basketball, but I think as a 46-year-old woman who's not that tall, my options may be limited. But I'm not gonna be held back by that any more than I absolutely have to - but maybe not the NBA... Anyway, this thing about deliberate practice... In order to do deliberate practice, you have to not be afraid of being not very good at something.

Yeah.

There has to be a willingness to acknowledge the areas where one could improve and a belief that improvement is possible. Have you learned anything in your coaching and your work generally with people that can help to make it a bit easier to face up to the things we're not very good at? 'Cause we often like to bury our heads in the sand when we notice that something's not good.

Absolutely. I think at the heart of this is the fixed and growth mindset. So let's use basketball as an example. A fixed mindset believes that you are either good or bad at basketball, but it was just sort of a birthright. The growth mindset is, "I believe that if I practice and apply myself, I can get better. I can grow my skills and abilities". So if you have a fixed mindset and you believe you are in Michael Jordan's camp, then what happens is you avoid opportunities where that might be proved to be untrue. So you avoid challenges because that might give you evidence that you're not actually the really good basketball player, that you're actually the really bad basketball player. So we don't step into those challenges when we have a fixed mindset. If you have a growth mindset, opportunities to try and fail are integral to our ability to grow. So we step into those opportunities and I think the heart of the growth mindset is, "What can I learn from this?" And so the focus is on learning. It's not on the prize or the outcome or the grade.

Yeah. So that's a really important thing, isn't it? Having a growth mindset does not mean that you're going to become the best in the world at, for example, playing basketball. It means that you are willing to embrace the possibility of learning and growth and improvement. So moving in that direction, but there may well be all sorts of factors that influence how far you can get along that path.

Yes.

But it's that willingness to do things that are difficult and to grow through the experience, yeah?

Yes. And connecting that work to how skilled you are. So for example, this is my very first podcast interview and so recognising that I was going to be better at this if I spent some time reviewing your previous podcasts and taking an hour to reflect on some ideas, that was a growth mindset. And recognising that I might listen to this and say, "Why did I say that? That was really silly". Or, "Oh, I sound really weird, I need to work on my vocal quality" or whatever. But it's almost viewing this as like step one on a thousand step journey as opposed to, "Oh my gosh, if this is really good that I'm good at podcasts and if this sucks, then I should never do this again".

Well can I just say before we say anything else - I think you sound fab so you sound lovely to me. But yes, do you know, I really appreciate you saying that because I know these things, but I still find it really, really hard. And I've just been through one of those phases where I've listened back to the work that I've been doing with these podcasts and other things and I've just been really critical of myself and I've been thinking, "Oh, I want that to be better and I want that to be better". And there are times when I almost don't even want to look at the things that I think aren't very good, because it's scary when you're doing new stuff and you put yourself out there. You just want it to be great 'cause you know how hard you're trying. I think we have to acknowledge that it can be quite uncomfortable.

Very uncomfortable. And two other shout-outs to amazing women. Tara Mohr, same spelling as my last name, no relation. She is doing work on how to feel that fear and do it anyway and acknowledge that this is natural and this is part of the human experience. It doesn't mean that you're bad or should stop or are not ready. It's just a natural feeling that comes up and we all experience it. And then, you know, in Carol Dweck's work - she's the researcher out of Stanford that coined the term 'growth mindset' and studies it, mostly in children and in academic contexts. I just think of one of her original research studies - she's got kids doing puzzles and measuring the growth mindset and the fixed mindset. And one of the kids gets the puzzle that has more pieces so it's more difficult and he goes, "I love a challenge!" So I try to embody that little kid when I feel that fear and that shrinking feeling of, "Oh, I'm not good at this, so I should just stop". I try and just channel my inner five-year-old and go, "Oh, I love a challenge!"

Well I wish there was a little video of that that we could just switch on when we need reminding. Wouldn't that be great if you have a little gif on your phone or something.

Exactly.

Something I just, I've really noticed this about learning, I wonder if you've found this too. So it's taken me a long time to recognise this about the learning process, but I reckon it's a bit like climbing a range of hills. So you start off at the bottom of the hill and you climb all

the way to the top of it and it's really hard work and you get to the top of the hill and you think that's where you're going. And then suddenly from that point you realise that there's a whole range of hills ahead of you that are much higher and you're going to have to kind of go down and up some more and you couldn't see them from where you started. And my experience of learning things is that you kind of start out and you make all this progress and it's very exciting. And then you get to a point where you can suddenly see that there are much bigger hills ahead of you. And that can be really disheartening.

Absolutely.

That moment where your awareness has grown before your skills of going to match it. And it can be really easy to get discouraged at that point and think, "Oh, you know, I haven't made any progress", but actually you have climbed the hill. You just can't see it because you're standing on the top of it.

That is absolutely true to my experience, Katie. You've described that well. And perhaps just that visual can help you acknowledge the truth that you are enough as you are right now and you are also a work in progress and those things are simultaneously true.

But I want to take the little puzzle boy with me on my hill climbing. I think I definitely would like him. I suppose something that I wrestle with a little bit and I wonder how you feel about this is, we kind of live in a culture where we like to find others that we can see as experts. And the way I feel is that I don't feel like an expert in anything other than my own experience and know only too well how flawed I am and how many mistakes I make all the time. And I really want that to be part of what I communicate to other people. But I also want it to be helpful. So in your work, in coaching people, in supporting people in moving into leadership roles, how do you balance that for yourself? 'Cause I'm sure people want to see your expertise, but you're clearly wanting to bring that humanity in too.

That is such an insightful question, Katie. For me, that is what I believe will probably be a lifelong challenge of coaching. And that finesse of being able to incorporate, for example, you know, offering that a gratitude journal at the end of the day has statistical relevance and, you know, improves someone's happiness, right, at the population level. So offering that up to someone, but then also recognising, respecting, drawing out their own wisdom because it turns out, you know, it's great to have all this academic research, but populations are summarised and if you're trying to change your own behaviour, the only data that matters is that sample size of one. So if you're the outlier, right? And it turns out a gratitude journal not only doesn't help you, it hurts you because it makes you feel bad about yourself because you can't come up with something every night and you go to bed feeling like a loser, right?

Yeah.

You know? So one of the things that becoming a coach and practicing coaching has done for me is helped me to check in with others and recognise how often I assume I know someone's experience and how often I'm wrong with that assumption. And I mean every

time I think I know it's... and even if I might be on the right track, there's always a nuance that I would have missed if I didn't check in.

People, in my experience at least, people tend to have an awful lot of useful information about how to be well.

Yeah.

And I tend to feel that creating a kind of expert-focused culture isn't necessarily helpful for a lot of us because I think the turning point for me and for other people that I've worked with has been the moment where they realise that maybe there isn't anyone out there who has a sort of pre-packaged answer for them and that the answers start to appear through a process of self-reflection and self-knowledge and self-trust, more importantly. Actually believing that what you experience and what you feel and what you notice has value beyond what you might read about in a book or watch in a video or be told by a professional. That your understanding of yourself has validity and is really, really worth listening to.

You don't see me nodding here, but I wholeheartedly agree.

Podcasts are not great for nodding are they? Also, I had a lovely conversation with somebody the other day and she was showing me a page from her book - which we realised we were going to have to come up with another way of doing that or move to video. So before we finish, Erica, do you have a 'Little Challenge' that you'd like to suggest for us?

I do. So my 'Little Challenge' is around that sample size of one. What I would like to challenge folks to do is just to take 10 minutes and get out paper and pen and to think about their lives maybe the last 10 years, 20 years, whatever's relevant for you, and think about the times when you were thriving. You know, maybe it's a six-month period, a one-year period or 'when I lived in London', whatever it was, like that was a good time in my life. And ask yourself, what daily habits were present in those times of thriving? You might be surprised to notice a pattern. For example, when I did this on myself, I recognised very quickly that having a workout buddy - so being able to have not only a daily workout, but with somebody that I cared about - it really is the distinguishing piece between the years when I felt like I was thriving in the years when I felt like I was struggling. So thinking through and discovering for yourself, what is the most critical catalyst for your own wellbeing?

Oh, that's a really interesting thing to think about, isn't it? Thank you for that. And presumably that's a process that you can go through as many times as you want, but even doing it once might lead to an insight about a habit that perhaps isn't currently present in your life that you might want to reintroduce?

Yes, and I think too, you know, maybe it's something a little bit more...so for example, well I was really grateful during that period of my life. Well then you can Google 'gratitude

interventions' and there's all kinds of things in the research, like a gratitude journal or savouring before meal and all of those things. So really using as a starting point, that reflection of like, what is it that's going on for me when I feel like I am at my best?

Wonderful question, thank you. Thank you for that. So Erica, I just want to say a big thank you to you. I didn't know what direction our conversation might go in this afternoon, but I'm really delighted that it went in the direction of learning and mindset.

Yeah. I feel great about this. Katie, you made this so easy. Thank you.

So this is your first ever podcast interview?

It is.

I am really honoured. Who knows what's going to happen next! Thank you for that.

Thank you!