

Simon Mainwaring:

From We First and Goal 17 Media, welcome to Lead With We. I'm Simon Mainwaring, and today I'm talking with my friend and colleague, Dr. Mark Goulston, a psychiatrist and co-founder of the Michelangelo Mindset, who coaches top executives from some of the world's leading companies. We'll be talking about how you, as a leader, can take better care of your own mental health in these very challenging times. And, how to lead with listening and empathy to succeed in today's changing marketplace.

Simon Mainwaring:

Mark, welcome to Lead With We.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

Been looking forward to this. Good to see you, Simon.

Simon Mainwaring:

Good to see you, Mark. I hope you're well and that all is well in your world. For those who don't know you, you've had this incredibly varied and important career. You've authored nine books. Your early career was focused around helping people cope with suicide, and death and dying. You taught at UCLA in the psychiatry department and trained the FBI and police. There's so many things that I want to dive into.

Simon Mainwaring:

But firstly, how would you characterize this moment in time that all of us are going through? This prolonged standoff with COVID that's been going on for the last 18 months. From your professional opinion, how would you characterize it?

Dr. Mark Goulston:

Well, I think the world is going through a prolonged trauma. There's a difference between stress and trauma. When you're stressed, you can focus on your goals with difficulty. But, when stress crosses over into trauma, you focus on trying to relieve the distress. We can focus, when we're under stress, on goals but when it crosses over into distress, we focus on relieving it. When it's unrelenting and we don't find relief, it's very, very difficult to really get centered and focus on what we need to get done.

Simon Mainwaring:

I was so interested in talking to you because you help leaders of large companies with huge responsibilities navigate economic challenges at any time, but COVID is so unique. What have you seen in your work, The stresses they're facing and the challenges to leadership outright?

Dr. Mark Goulston:

Well, I think the stresses they're facing is, with so many unknowns and so many variables, to be able to contain that, in other words hold it within yourself and still say positive without letting the anxiety that you don't feel in control cross over into your people, it takes a fair amount of mental and psychological stamina.

Simon Mainwaring:

I actually agree. To a very, very limited extent, even with my great and mighty team at We First, I feel the pressure of not just looking after the business but looking after the whole human beings. But then, I often find that, in a leadership capacity, you're not taking care of yourself as well as you might under these urgent circumstances.

Simon Mainwaring:

So for those listening, what are some points for how we can better nurture ourselves so that we can do your jobs as leaders inside business?

Dr. Mark Goulston:

Well, something that I'm a big fan of, but again it may be my own personal bias, is I've been blessed to have 10 mentors. They've all died, so that's not a blessing. The last one was Larry King, and before him was a fellow named Warren Bennis, a big leadership person. One of the things that I find helpful is, when I'm feeling stressed, in my mind's eye I call upon one of my deceased mentors and I let them talk me through it. Because sometimes, we can't talk ourselves through it.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

The reason this works, actually neuro physiologically, is that when we're under stress, what happens is our cortisol goes up, that's the stress hormone. When our cortisol goes up, yes we can do mindfulness, we can do meditation, we can calm it down, but something that directly counters high cortisol is another neurochemical, actually an endocrine chemical, called oxytocin.

Simon Mainwaring:

To press you on that a little bit more, because I think even to understand how the physiological aspects are so helpful ... We've had this sustained, heightened sense of emergency now for 18 months where literally people's lives are at risks, their business livelihood was at risk, their future was jeopardized. There's been so many reasons to have cause for concern. What spin does that put on it, when it's been sustained over a long time? Because I always interpreted fight or flight as this moment in time, but it feels like it's been drawn out forever.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

Well, I think what it is, it's a marathon and then some. It's not a sprint. So what happens is, and I don't like these trendy words, the new normal, but we're in something that we just have to get used to.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

Now it's interesting, after 9/11 I was called into big organizations and companies. And they say, "You have to calm our people down." I would also meet with high net worth individuals for some of the investment firms saying, "You need to calm our clients down." One of the things that I did, which I'm also recreating now in the face of COVID, is I met with people and I said, "Share in your teams, or share at your tables," when I was brought in to do this with a large organization, "Share times in your life that you didn't think you'd get through but you did get through, and they taught you you were stronger and more resilient than you thought you were. And also, share times when someone may have helped you through it, a critical person who helped you through it."

Dr. Mark Goulston:

I can tell you when I did this, Simon, within less than a minute, people were starting to cry but they were crying with relief. They started sharing stories of when they used to be vulnerable but they got through, and they also shared stories of someone who was there for them during those times. What happens is when you do this in a group, there is this collective immersion in oxytocin. Because what happens is, people you thought you knew, you're hearing about things they'd been through. And always, when I ask people, "How many of you feel that you're in a group of very special people," everyone raises their hand and these are people they'd known for years.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

And really, what it is, is they shared in a collective way, this shared vulnerability that they got through in the past and they never knew that about that person. Everybody started to feel, "I'm in a group of incredibly strong, resilient and good people. Wow." And then, I have them select times when someone helped them through it because the homework assignment is, "Go back to your companies and do this exercise because you'll tap into people having gone through similar times in their life." And then the other homework assignment is, "Find that person who helped you through it, or find their next of kin if they'd died, and share with them something that's in my book Just Listen," something I call a power thank you. So you reach out to those people and you say, "This is a long overdue thank you." Or, "This is a thank you to your mom or dad."

Dr. Mark Goulston:

The three parts of a power thank you is, "This is what you did for me at such-and-such a time." And then, the second part of it is an acknowledgement, "You didn't have to do that. You went out on a limb to help me through that." And the third thing you say, "This is what it personally meant to me and still means to me." What happens is when you reach out and tell people these things, there's a feeling of just gratitude, which also increases the oxytocin.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

So when people feel a connection to other people and feel cared about by other people, it counteracts high cortisol. When you counteract high cortisol, what happens is you begin to physically calm down. And as you physically calm down, you're able to access the higher levels of your brain. Because when cortisol goes up, it triggers something in your brain called an amygdala. The amygdala is a pivot and a point guard of the middle of your emotional brain. So high cortisol leads to something called an amygdala hijack. The amygdala then directs blood flow to go to your lower survival brain and away from your thinking brain. That's why a deer in the headlights, there's literally nothing going on upstairs there.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

But, if you can create high oxytocin, what happens is the cortisol goes down, the amygdala settles down, and the blood flow returns to your upper brain and you can begin to think again.

Simon Mainwaring:

We're seeing business change right now. We're seeing CEOs, founders, entrepreneurs show up in increasingly purposeful ways. Now, at one end of the spectrum, the charitable or positive way of looking at it is everyone realizes the gravity of the issues and people are just showing up differently. At the other extreme, it's cynically done, it's purpose washing and so on. And really, nothing's changed, it's just the latest managing of optics that companies do through their marketing.

Simon Mainwaring:

Do you, in your experience, feel like there's a change in the zeitgeist in leadership more broadly and there is something shifting? And if so, why? Or, do you think this is just the latest expression of something that's timeless, and nothing's really changed and it's just going to shake out as it always does?

Dr. Mark Goulston:

I think it's more the latter, but what I'm hoping is there will be some rising leaders who can inspire all of us.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

I have to tell you that I'm not that impressed by male leadership in the world. I think Angela Merkel, and Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand, they are incredible models, I think, of great leadership. I've been on other interviews, and I was mentioning part of my frustration with a lot of male leaders is most leaders, but especially male leaders, came up through sports. I think what happens is, if you're a man, you're leadership often gets corrupted by the need to win and the need to not lose.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

It's a real big part of you. It's too easy for the male ego to be intoxicated by power, and money and being able to win. I am more hopeful of women being able to take more leadership roles. But they have a hard road because still, in technology companies, they're still doing very poorly in terms of being on boards if directors or in the C-suite. But, I'm hopeful that that will change.

Simon Mainwaring:

I could not agree with you more, Mark. I think the next era is the era of women's leadership. I think the role of men right now is to make space for them, and to work with them and to overcome this false dichotomy or binary idea of men versus women, us versus them, humanity versus nature. I don't think that serves anybody and I think that's hard for men to do because it's so ingrained in them, as you say. I do agree that sport probably has some role to play in that.

Simon Mainwaring:

As we look to the future now, you talk about this Michelangelo Mindset, which is really about revealing the truth inherent within an individual, within a company and so on, and bringing that to life. As a tool or platform for us all to move forward in our leadership capacity, help us understand what that is and how it can serve us at this moment in time?

Dr. Mark Goulston:

Well, Michelangelo was quoted as saying, "I saw the angel in the marble and I carved until I set it free." That's been an overarching concept for my life.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

When I was a psychiatrist focusing on suicide prevention, I saw the hope inside my suicidal patients that they couldn't see. All I had to do was introduce them to the hope inside, and as soon as they started to feel it, they started to cry. When they started to cry, they started to feel relief.

Simon Mainwaring:

Wow.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

We segue, though, to Michelangelo Leadership. If people can look up real leaders, it's a publication, Michelangelo Leadership. The way I view it, and this is the only executive coaching I do, I believe that the leaders of the future will engender in their people trust, confidence, safety, respect, admiration, liking them and being inspired by them. And if you disagree with it, what kind of leader would you be if your people don't trust you, they don't feel safe, they don't feel respect, they don't admire you, they're embarrassed by you, they don't like you and they don't feel inspired. And then, what I talk about and it's the only coaching I do with executives, I only work with people who want to grow into that.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

Tell me if this would result, in your mind's eye, in a leader that would fulfill all those criteria. They're unflappable under pressure but they're present, they're not robotic. They're knowledgeable, they don't shoot from the hip. They're wise, they know what's important and they can focus on that. In a crisis, they take charge but they're not controlling. And when the crisis passes, they're able to seek consensus. They have a sense of humor about themselves, they don't take themselves that seriously so there's a certain self deprecating humor. They're gracious in both victory and defeat. And, they're humble.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

When I coach executives I say, "Pick out some stakeholders that you trust, and come back to me and see where you can get even better." That's how we carve away and create the kind of leader that the world needs.

Simon Mainwaring:

I think that's really powerful. And, I think it's also enormously challenging. For any one of us listening, is it as you say, just picking one of them in a certain stakeholder group, and just being intentional and mindful of it, as real time, real situations arise? Is it a how should we approach it programmatically in our lives to be better leaders in such a challenging time?

Dr. Mark Goulston:

Well, I think as a leader, if you're there, if your mission tomorrow is how can I make this company a better company, how can I cause my people to feel calmer in the age of COVID, what can I get done so that they feel realistic hope, so I think the key is the intention.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

It's interesting, because one of the most common things that these good leaders do well is almost all of it, except some of them have trouble being humble.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right. Well, it is a challenge. I think all of us, at different points of career, always have to throttle between how you process what success is and what that says about you, or not you, and whose responsible for that success, there's a lot of nuance there.

Simon Mainwaring:

But, what I'm fascinated by, because you know, obviously this podcast is called Lead With We, and it's about this idea of collaborative leadership. What I hear is that you're challenging leaders to become someone that people want to follow and you deepen the connections between them, and so on. Is it so that you can all work together more effectively? What is the role of collaboration in this idea of the most effective leader?

Dr. Mark Goulston:

Well, I think the most effective leader is the leader who, if they don't show up because they're pulled away, that the company not only does well, it does even better. It's the kind of leader that engenders cooperation and collaboration, not just in words, but in action.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

Here's an exercise that we can all do better at, because one of the other things I talk about is Michelangelo Listening. I spoke in Moscow, along with a Nobel Prize winner, Daniel Kahneman, a couple years ago. There's a video clip of this. One of the things I'm trying to teach the world, and I'm going to do it with you and I think you'll do well. Michelangelo Listening is realizing that, inside people who are listening to you, is someone who is listening for something.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

If you can focus on what they're listening for underneath what they're listening to, and you deliver on it, they're going to lean towards you and want more.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

I'm going to do a little, mini experiment with you because I have confidence that you'll do okay wish me luck.

Simon Mainwaring:

Fantastic! Let's do it.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

If I focus on you listening to me, I think you're doing a great job of asking me questions, hopefully I'm doing an okay answering them. But in your mind, you had questions that you wanted to follow and you're listening to me.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

But if I focus on what you're listening for, tell me if you just have a different experience. If I go underneath you're listening to me, what you're listening for is the trust and confidence of your listeners and viewers means a lot to you. You want to honor that trust and confidence by not wasting their time. You also want to honor their trust and confidence in you by bringing them guests that can bring them information that is relevant to them, clear, concise and doable by them immediately. Because if you can tee up guests that bring that, you're giving them value, you're not wasting their time and you're fulfilling wanting to honor their trust and confidence. Is that true?

Simon Mainwaring:

That's absolutely true. I am always, in every question I ask, incredibly intentional about the situation that the listeners, as I understand it, are in and what they're trying to solve for. Because I do think these are acute circumstances, and we don't have time to mess around in terms of how we equip people to elevate their own lives, but also solve for these really large issues. It's time to get to the meat of the issue, so absolutely.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

If we just revisit, just quickly, Michelangelo Leadership, your people are listening for the ability to feel safe in these uncertain times. They're listening for something which, sadly in the business world, has become a unicorn. They're listening for someone they can actually trust, because it's so easy to not trust leaders. Because it seems like leaders will often just change their message, depending on the audience. It's difficult to trust someone who changes their message, depending on the audience.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's very true. I think if there's one thing that I'm very conscious of on behalf of the listeners, it's that I feel like we're all expected to be Olympics athletes right now, when emotionally everyone's hobbled. I feel like it's a very unkind set of circumstances, but also a very urgent one.

Simon Mainwaring:

I think this is a unique moment in time, I think COVID has been incredibly exacting on people's lives and I don't think that's been given the recognition, or time or care that it deserves. Someone like you, with your lifetime of insights, is invaluable because you really help us understand how everyone can move themselves and their companies forward. I think this is moment that you were made for, Mark, in a sense.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

Well, thank you. I want to give everyone, including you and myself, an exercise. This is Michelangelo Listening. It's a deeper dive into what people are listening for. It's called the HUVA, H-U-V-A, Exercise. What you do is, each day, pick on conversation in which you want to be completely present as opposed to transactional and only thinking about what's in it for you. You pick that conversation with the intention that, afterwards, you're going to rate yourself from their point of view, on a scale of one to 10, according to H-U-V-A.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

So after you leave the conversation, and I will tell you, you're doing very well here with me, on a scale of one to 10, how much did that other person felt heard out versus you interrupting them, you not

answering their question, changing the subject? On a scale of one to 10, how much did they feel understood? Which you demonstrate by hearing the other person say something that emotionally matters to them, and they use words like terrible, awful, amazing.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

And you demonstrate understanding by saying to them, "Hm." Hm shows that you've taken in what they said and you say, "Say more about the awful." And then, they go on and you get a deeper understanding. V stands for how much to do they feel valued by you, on a scale of one to 10. Value is what you're doing. You're saying, "Mark, some of the stuff that you know, this is the time for someone with your skills. What you've got, Mark, is really valuable." The final is how much do they feel that they added value to what they had to say, on a scale of one to 10. Often, that can be that you've listened so deeply into what they said, understood it and valued it that you can say, "Have you ever thought of using this in this other setting? Because I think this other setting really needs what you have."

Dr. Mark Goulston:

So I would give you high grades in the HUVA exercise. Just use it at home though, Simon.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right. Always use it at home. Take it home, the good stuff. No, absolutely. I've got a 19 and a 22 year old daughter, and I think that is a very, very powerful tool to use, to listen effectively, at a time when it's so formative for them and their futures. I think that's a gift you gave us.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

Here's my promise. If you do this once a day for a week and watch the results, they will astound you.

Simon Mainwaring:

We're trying to solve for our future through the power of business, at a time when we can't even agree on what reality we're in. What I mean by that, social media, and the algorithms, and the regurgitation of the datasets that we've informed them with has polarized us and divided the country in deep, deep ways. It makes it doubly hard to solve for our future because we're not having the same experience. By and large, the vast majority of people are living an increasing part of their lives through the lens of screens.

Simon Mainwaring:

So from an emotional, self management point of view, how do we find common ground again so that we can work together more effectively?

Dr. Mark Goulston:

I'm really amazed that you're asking this because I just posted a blog on Medium called How Oprah Could Unify Washington. So I've got to tell you what it's about.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

Oprah just coauthored a book with Dr. Bruce Perry called What Happened to You? It talks about something called trauma informed therapy, which means that when you're with people, instead of

reacting to what they say or do, you basically believe that they're decent people. And instead of reacting to what that is, you say, "What happened to you that this is what you believe?"

Dr. Mark Goulston:

So what I write about in the blog is if Nancy Pelosi and Mitch McConnell, the two leading voices for their parties in Congress, would sit down with Oprah and Oprah would say, "What happened to you that has caused you to believe so firmly what you believe?" It would give them the chance to tell their narrative. It would also give them the chance to expose if their narrative isn't that deep, if it's just following party lines.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

There's a famous quote from Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis who said, "Sunlight makes for the best disinfectant." The thought is, if someone who's not political like Oprah, or someone else, would sit down and say, "Tell us the views of your party and your views. And, what happened to you that this is what you believe?" And then, just draw it out of them and see what comes up.

Simon Mainwaring:

A lot of the things you've said point to an idea that you speak to, which is called surgical empathy. It really is about being able to understand, with compassion, the person opposite you and to have that intentional listening, or Michelangelo Listening as you say.

Simon Mainwaring:

I want to bring this back to leadership. As all of us, as founders, solopreneurs, CEOs of majority corporations are trying to work through the next year, the next five years, what role should empathy play and how would it help us?

Dr. Mark Goulston:

Well, I think empathy plays a huge role and listening plays a huge role. The reason being is if you can think that all of your people's minds are overwhelmed, just about everyone is overwhelmed ... I know I'm overwhelmed. If my wife says, "Don't forget to do such-and-such," there's a good chance, later on in the day, I'm going to forget where I parked my car because I had to make room for what she said.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

When you show empathy or empathic listening, which is what I'm trying to teach the world, when a person's mind is totally overwhelmed and they can't take anymore without something else getting kicked out, when you show empathy and listening, which is a great way of showing caring, and they're able to share something with you, it tends to create space in their mind to be able to think and consider what you're saying.

Simon Mainwaring:

I want to thank you, Mark, for a couple of things. Firstly, you take very acute situations that very few people have to deal with, or very elevated situations which very few people have access to, and you translate them to us in a way that is very actionable. That is a true gift.

Simon Mainwaring:

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I also really, really appreciate you helping us navigate this time. I think it's unique for so many reasons, but I also fear it's a pilot for what the future is going to look like. The skills you're sharing are going to need to become habitual for us, rather than one-offs for that moment in time that was.

Simon Mainwaring:

Thank you so much for some time today, Mark. Thank you for your insights and we look forward to learning more from you.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

Well, thank you for having me on. I look forward to having you on my podcast, My Wakeup Call. Which I hope people will tune into, because I've had people ranging from Simon Mainwaring to Jordan Peterson. How's that for a big range? To Larry King, to Doug Conan, Norman Lear. I hope you'll check out My Wakeup Call, where you'll be able to find those interviews.

Simon Mainwaring:

Fantastic. Yes, everyone check out Wakeup Call. And Mark, again, thank you.

Dr. Mark Goulston:

Thank you.

Simon Mainwaring:

Thanks for joining us for another episode of Lead With We. Our show is produced by Goal 17 Media. You can always find more information about our guests in the show notes of each episode. Make sure you subscribe to Lead With We on Apple, Google or Spotify. And, do share it with your friends and colleagues. You can also watch our episodes on YouTube at We First TV.

Simon Mainwaring:

I'm excited to share that my new book, Lead With We, comes out November 9th and is available for preorder now on Amazon, Google Books and Barnes and Noble, so check it out.

Simon Mainwaring:

See you next episode. And until then, let's all Lead With We.