Flying Solo podcast - Adrian Baillargeon

How to unlock your team's high performance potential

*Automated transcript

Cec Busby [00:00:04]:

Hi, everybody. I'm Cec Busby, editor of Flying Solo. Welcome to our weekly podcast where we step inside the minds and lives of soloists and small business owners.

If teamwork makes the dream work, today's guest has the winning formula. Adrian Baillargeon is a team performance expert, speaker and author with decades of experience helping teams to thrive. Whether it's assisting Cricket Australia to find their groove, or helping big corporates to understand the art and science of teamwork, Adrian has practical advice for what it takes to create a cohesive and collaborative team.

He joins us today to unpack the findings from his new book, *Teams That Swear By Each Other, Not At Each Other*. And best of all, if you like what you hear, Flying Solo members can score a free downloadable copy for a limited time. So check the episode notes for details.

Adrian, welcome. Thanks for joining me on the show today.

Adrian Baillargeon [00:01:04]:

Right on, Cec. Thanks for having me. I'm looking forward to our chat.

Cec Busby [00:01:09]:

My absolute pleasure. Now you have recently written a very interesting book that's called *Teams That Swear.* What was the process and the inspiration for that book? Why did you decide, you know, you've got this vast career working in leadership and communication and helping teams become the best that they can be. Why did you decide it was time to put pen to paper?

Adrian Baillargeon [00:01:37]:

Well, Cec, I'd worked 20 years in the corporate space for some big brands across Canada, Africa, Australia. I'd worked in a variety of different types of roles from marketing management, sales management, joint venture management, risk - a number of different areas, and I suppose the common theme across my corporate career was either leading teams, or working with a number of external partners where we had to create these micro cultures that would help both of us achieve our objectives. And when I started to think about, or when I got into this space of helping leadership teams work better together, the book itself, the title actually inspired how I approach the work I do now, but the inspiration came from a colleague of mine. When I moved to Australia from Canada, I made the observation that I thought, jeez, Australians, they like to swear a lot. And I had a colleague in

particular who swore - in a good way, it wasn't in a bad way - and I would always give them a hard time, saying "Jeez, you've got a potty mouth", and they would tell me, no, no. It's good for you. And me being a little bit stubborn, and I jumped on doctor Google just to see what this person was talking about and lo and behold, we were both right. It turned out that Australians are in the top 3 in terms of countries that swear. But probably more importantly, my colleague was right in that there were some benefits in swearing. So swearing can make you stronger - it can increase your pain threshold – but probably more related to the work that I was doing was that there are studies that showed that when people and teams swore amongst each other, that they had higher limits.

Cec Busby:

-- not at each other?

Adrian Baillargeon

Correct. Correct. Yes. Yep. Very good. So if they're swearing at each other, it's a different story. But when they were swearing in front of each other, those teams tended to have higher levels of trust, which is obviously the foundation for a team that works really well together. So that was a little bit the inspiration for the title of the book. And then the process of me writing the book was - it was a little bit of a challenge at first. How do you capture all of your experience over, you know, 20 years and then the learnings that you get from interviewing different leaders from around the world. And my goal is to make it really, really simple. I wanted to make or give advice to leaders that would make it really straightforward for them. So my goal was to go. Right. What are two things? If there's two things that leaders focused on in terms to get their teams to really shine, or as the title of the books suggest to get their teams swearing by each other, not about each other. The goal was to come up with those 2 things. So through all the research, I was able to narrow that down to 2 things - relationships and clarity. Then once I had that process in place, it really helped me take off.

Cec Busby [00:04:32]:

Dive into that a little bit more. The art and the science around creating this bonding within teams. Like, what do you think is the secret to high performing teams?

Adrian Baillargeon [00:04:43]:

Well, when I talk about the art and the science of high performing teams, there's a lot of research that has already happened in this space. If you jump on Google, say how to create a high performing team, I think you'll get a few billion results in half a second. So what I wanted to do was take some of the, I would say, the credible, the established research. So some of this, obviously, there's Bruce Tuckling's work that he did in the sixties around team development. But I will also wanted to look at some more recent work. So there was a couple of pieces done. 1 particularly done by Google called Project Aristotle. And another piece that was fascinating from a gentleman by the name of Professor Sandy Petlin from MIT, where he looked at not necessarily what people said, but he tracked their patterns of

how they interacted. So how did they communicate? Who did they communicate with? Where did they communicate? So that was really the science side of things, but I think as we all know when working with people, that because in individuals and humans are so unique, there needs to be a little bit of art. You have to be able to work on the fly. There's not one set way that's gonna work when it comes to getting your team to work well together. So that was my approach to find the science, and then look at the art. And the art came from my experience and interviews from leaders across the world. And when it comes down to it, my view is that there's 2 main ingredients. And the first one is relationships. So for a high performing team, relationships matter most. So when we're talking about strong relationships, we're talking about things like trust and connection, psychological safety, feedback, and conflict. How is conflict managed? And my view is that conflict should actually be used intentionally because you can get a lot more innovation and better ideas when that's done. So those are the contributors to the relationships. The second ingredient to high performing teams and teams that swear by each other, it's all around clarity and alignment. So in my mind, clarity creates cohesion. When teams are aligned on things like, what's the purpose of this team? Not the purpose of the organization or the department, but what is the purpose of this team? What are the objectives of the group? What are the roles and responsibilities? And probably the underlying piece that teams really need to be aligned on is what are the 3 or 4 key behaviors that are gonna drive the success of this group over the next period of time? If leaders can get the relationships right, and the clarity and alignment right, then their team will be in a great position to really shine.

Cec Busby [00:07:32]:

That's probably easier said than done. How do you make sure that your team is aligned, that they all have the same purpose and that they're all reaching for the same goals? And I really am interested also to dive into that bit where you said conflict is also great for business.

Adrian Baillargeon [00:07:53]:

So, Cec, I think when it comes to the first question around how do we do this? If there's anything I know about teams and particularly senior leadership teams, is that complacency is costly. When there are hidden issues, if they fester, they will always explode. And when they explode, it's not pretty. My belief is that when you are very deliberate, it pays dividends. So when it comes to that piece around clarity, and making sure that the team are aligned, it's about being intentional - and those things are discussed on a regular basis. So, for example, if we're talking about what's the purpose of the team - a, it's always good to remind each other what that is because we can get caught up on the everyday hustle and bustle. But if we always come back to what the purpose of the group is, it actually changes the things that you talk about and the quality of the conversations. Because you're always bringing back any initiatives, any activities, any dilemmas, challenges. If you bring it up to, does this tick the box for us? in terms of why we're here, it will help the team make progress quicker. But you have to talk about it on a regular basis.

Roles and responsibilities is another one that if it's a set and forget approach, that's when teams get into trouble. You think of the standard, the traditional position description, that people when they apply for a job, that's what the organization needs at the time. But things

change so quickly right now, that what people are doing when they start their job changes dramatically over time. Even over a year or 2, the tasks and what they're responsible for can change so quickly. So it's important for teams to talk about and ensure that everybody's clear on who's doing what, because things can change so quickly. Behaviours is another one. Depending on what the team in the context of what's happening within the team environment, that will require different behaviours. So for example, if it's a new team, there probably needs to be more emphasis on creating connection and trust. The leader probably plays more of a role in directing, versus if a team's been together for, say, 12 to 18 months, then the behaviours that are required from the leader and the team are probably different because they're more comfortable with each other. They've had some time. They've already got some wins on the board, and they may be working on things that are more complex, that require different behaviours. So that's the bottom line in terms of that is make sure that it's a regular component of the discussion that teams talk about. Have an agenda item on when you're catching up as a team, whether that's weekly, fortnightly, or monthly, allocate 10 to 15 minutes of alignment and pick one of those items to talk about.

Cec Busby [00:10:44]:

So how do you make sure that when you're having those conversations that people feel safe enough to be open and honest about any issues that might be coming up?

Adrian Baillargeon [00:10:52]:

Oh, the old safety question. Yes. Well, it's a great insight from your perspective that the 2 are related. You can't have one without the other. When I talk about relationships, I really make it clear to the groups that I'm working with that whilst clarity and alignment, that can be achieved much quicker because it's just about the team discussing and making a decision. When it comes to relationships, it does take time. It takes time to build them. It takes times to build that trust. Trust may be broken, and it'll take time to rebuild it. When it comes down to safety, one of the best exercises that I like doing with teams is just have them talk about what are the things that they feel comfortable about, and what are the things that sometimes they're a little bit hesitant to talk about? And when they start to identify those things that they may be hesitant about, it creates an opportunity for them to share some of their concerns, but in a safe environment. And the more that they can talk about those things, the more comfortable that they will be in in raising issues in the future.

Cec Busby [00:11:59]:

In your book, you also talk about how to assess whether your team is sinking or spinning or spiking. So can you explain a little for our listeners what you mean by these 3 categories and some kind of practical advice, for if you identify your team is sinking, for example.

Adrian Baillargeon [00:12:17]:

Yes. So when I've been working with organizations, I've been identifying that there are 3 types of teams that you probably don't want to be in, or if you are in one of those teams, you wanna take steps to move towards the 4th type of team, which is the shining team. And

that's when relationships are very strong, and there's a high level of clarity. A sinking team is the opposite. So a sinking team is when the relationships within the group are very poor, very shallow. And, also, there is a lack of alignment and a lack of clarity. So, typically, in those teams, these are some of the behaviours to look out for or some of the feelings. So, typically, in teams that are sinking, there's very little progress made, there's not a lot of interaction amongst team members, so they feel very much alone. They're probably delivering more issues than actual wins. And what happens in those teams is the people within, at an individual level, they feel like they're not making progress. Their confidence drops. And, typically, what you see is absenteeism goes up, number of sick days goes up. Response to communications is very long. And sometimes what you'll see is because people's confidence is dropping in those teams, they disengage totally, or there's sometimes mental health issues start to arise from that. So if in your team you're finding there's not a lot of communication amongst the group, there's more issues being delivered than actual wins, there's a chance that your team is in that sinking space. There's another team that's a little bit - this team I always say is a little bit dangerous because - and this is the spinning team. This is when teams are typically, the relationships are quite strong. So everybody gets along. There's a high level of trust, they connect well, they're comfortable in raising issues, but there's a lack of alignment. So often, there's overlap between roles and responsibilities, or there's people pointing fingers - I thought you were doing that, or that's my piece, you know, leave that to me. Often in those teams, because there's overlap in work, everybody's working really, really hard, but their energy isn't renewed because there's not many wins that are happening. So often in these teams, there's burnout, is a good sign that your team is spinning its tires. It's not making really meaningful differences. And also over time, what happens is resentment builds because everybody is so invested. They're invested in each other, invested in the task that they're doing, but they're not making any progress. And because of that, that resentment builds, and typically, the resentment starts to build toward the leader. And that's where the swearing happens over time, is the team starts swearing about the leader. And the leader themselves, their conference starts to drop, and leaves themselves asking a number of questions going, why are we not making a bigger difference? So that's a couple of examples of the of the teams, and you can look out for some of those behaviours, Cec, if you notice any of those characteristics. Also in my book, I've got a one page, it's like a scorecard. You can assess your team. And I always advise people, leaders, to do this with their team. Get each individual to complete that scorecard, and it's a simple one. Score yourselves between 0 and 10 in terms of connection and trust. Score yourselves between 0 and 10, between how safe people feel to make a mistake or share what they really think. And by doing it together, you're automatically taking a step towards improving how your team works, because it's creating this new level of dialogue and talking about things that people normally don't talk about. So it's a really simple way to make a small improvement in a short amount of time.

Cec Busby [00:16:16]:

If you're in one of those spinning teams, how can you progress to become, you know, the happy shiny team? How can you squash the problems and move forward and move towards that place where everyone's working together, rather than opposite to each other?

Adrian Baillargeon [00:16:34]:

Yes. Alright. So if you're a spinning team so, again, these are the teams that are working really hard, but not making a lot of progress. There are four places where you can start. And, again, this is about being deliberate in having these questions, or having these conversations amongst the team. So one, get the group together. I would suggest doing this face to face. Agree with the team. What is the purpose of this team? And, again, this is different than what's the purpose of our organization or the purpose of our department. It is what role does this team play in achieving the goals that the department or the organization has set for us. So get really clear and aligned. And when I say get clear, I mean, like, agree on what that is. Come up with a statement. Less than 15 words so that everybody is very clear. And then once you identify what that purpose is, ask the group to explain if we are doing this very well, if we are achieving this purpose - what are the signs, what are the things that we're going to see, what are the discussions that we're going to be have be having, if we're achieving our purpose. Capture all those ideas because what that becomes is your checklist of what you're trying to achieve. And you can revisit those on a monthly basis to say, right. How well are we achieving our purpose? Really simple way to do that. So that's the first thing is get aligned on the purpose.

The second thing is, typically, when it comes to objectives within teams, my experience working in the corporate workspace and now working with clients is that individuals have their own KPIs, but they keep them very close to their chest. They don't share them, they think it's a secret. I'm on the opposite end. I'm like, if you have individual KPIs, share them with your teammates because there's a chance that you could have similar goals, or that if each other understands what everybody's trying to achieve, they have a better understanding where people are coming from, and they might actually be able to contribute to help each other achieve each of their goals. So be transparent with that. Don't hold that close to your chest.

The second thing when it comes down to objectives is, we see this in sport all the time, but typically a sporting team, there's one goal. Win the flag, win the trophy, win the gold medal, whatever it might be. Often, when I'm working with teams, they do not have one common goal or overarching goal that they're working towards. It's a great activity to do is going, if there was one thing that this team did extremely well that's gonna drive the success of our department or our area, what's that one thing we have to do? And find a way for that group to set a goal aligned to that, and they all work towards that goal. It doesn't mean that their individual KPIs aren't important. But there is that one overarching goal that if everybody contributes to, it brings everybody closer together, and they're actually working as a true team to achieve one common goal.

And the third thing that I would suggest around if the team is spinning is to look at the roles and responsibilities. Again, we make so many assumptions that everybody knows what everybody's doing or what they're not doing. In the book, I share an exercise that talks about the black and white and the grey. It's that you can sit down and have somebody explain to the group saying, here's what I know I do. Here's what I know I don't do. But there's some of this bit in the middle - this is questions that I've got. You know? Who's responsible for this? I kinda feel like I am, but I also know it plays in your space Cec. But by getting everybody to share - and it doesn't have to be everybody all at once, you can have one person do it at one

meeting and somebody do it at the next meeting - and just spend 10 minutes on that. And what that does is give everybody perspective on what the individual thinks, but it also allows the rest of the group to share their perspective on what they think that person's role. "Oh Cec, I thought that's actually what you did. Oh, I didn't realize you didn't do that. We need to work out who's going to do that." So there's three areas there that I would suggest that if your team is spinning, look to align on purpose, set an overarching objective and share each other's individual KPIs and also have regular discussions about roles and responsibilities.

Cec Busby [00:20:54]:

So a few things I wanna dive into just from those comments. It seems like creating a collaborative environment is something that you really need to have in order for your team to thrive. And the other thing is, that align to one goal, the thing that sports teams have, are there any other notable differences in team dynamics that you've come across or challenges? Because you've worked with corporates and in the sports space. So how can the different leadership styles adapt, so that the strategies will work for both sides.

Adrian Baillargeon [00:21:35]:

Yeah. I think one of the things that I've noticed differently between sport and corporate - and I know there's often a number of similarities that people feel there are between the 2 - I think the objectives is one thing that is very different in sport. And in corporate - in sport, the objective is very clear. There's one thing that everybody in that team is trying to achieve and that's to win, right, to win that that premiership or the championship, depending what sport you play. What I'm finding right now is in the corporate space, it's not quite as clear. Because everybody has different objectives, and they have different goals. And that's why I think it's critical to have that overarching objective. When you have that, that's when true collaboration happens. It's in people's best interest to work together because they've got that one goal that they're trying to achieve.

The other thing that I've noticed in corporate, and I was trying Cec for a while, is how do I articulate this idea of what winning looks like in corporate. Because in sport, it's black and white. You score more points than the other person. That's typically your winner and your loser. And I really struggled to articulate my thinking around, well, how does that equate in corporate? But then Simon Sinek did some work recently around the infinite mindset, and he built off some work from a gentleman by the name of James Carse, who in the eighties introduced this concept of finite games and infinite games. And James Carse talks about how in sport, there's a clear winner and a loser. There's a very clear set of rules - you can do this and you can't do that, and you know who you're playing against. And Carse called this a finite game because there's a beginning and an end. Carse then says there's also other games that we play in life, and he calls these infinite games. And these are games that never end. So think about learning. The learning game never ends, you continuously learn. You can't win the learning game. You can just get better at it. Cars talks about how these infinite games, often the rules change consistently or sometimes there aren't, or that the players, the people that are playing the game, can change on an ongoing basis. And I think in business, particularly from a leader's perspective, it's critical for leaders to understand, what game are you playing? And to understand that both types of games are important. Finite

games in business, that's when you have a target - a sales target, a market share target, or whatever your business is, it's usually a quantifiable. Typically, those types of games with those types of goals, they give you something to work towards. It motivates you because you can achieve it. You go, right on, I've accomplished that, I'm gonna move on to something else. But it's also important for leaders to understand, what is the infinite game that they're playing? And by that, it is about how do you do things? What is your approach to dealing with people? Right? You can never win the people game, but you can get better at that on an ongoing basis. What are, in terms of an infinite game, what do you want to be known for? What is your expertise? Again, if you can identify that type of game, it helps you become a better leader. I've been working with a client who wanted to work on listening. So they're playing the listening game, and we set some clear targets. We said, alright, how can you demonstrate how you're listening? Well, I can ask the person to play back what they've told me. So I can ask questions to demonstrate that I'm listening. So we set some targets saying, alright, over the next week, you've gotta ask this question ten times in your conversation. And whilst that's an example of a finite game, because it's a start and a finish - it's a week long, the rules are you have to ask the question ten times - the ultimate game that that individual leader is playing is the listening game, and that person will never stop getting better at that. So I think that's something from a leadership perspective that I would encourage all leaders to think about is, the finite games are very typically pretty clear in what you're trying to play and win. But think about the bigger game, the game that's going to continue forever. What are those infinite games that you want to get better at?

Cec Busby [00:26:18]:

Have you encountered any kind of common obstacles that most leaders face when they're trying to improve their team dynamics?

Adrian Baillargeon [00:26:27]:

One of the challenges that comes across Cec, from a leadership perspective, is what role does that leader play in specific situations? So there's a lot of research, and there's a lot of talk about the value of empowering your employees, the people within your team. In the past, it used to be do as I say. Right? There was the dictator. Just do this and don't ask any questions. Just get that job done and we'll move on to the next. There's a real challenge right now from leadership to understand, well, how do I empower my employees, but, also, I feel like there's times where we could get things done quicker if I just told them what to do. But there's a hesitancy to do that because they don't wanna come across as this real rigid, old school type of leader who just tells people what to do. The reality is from a leadership perspective, when you have that leader hat on, and whether you're working one on one with your people or as a team, there is a role to be that director. There is a time and a place for it. There's a time where you have to teach people. There's a time actually where you have to make the decision and say, this is what we're going to do. Now that doesn't mean that that should be the default position all the time. There are other times where it's when does it make sense to coach your employee or your team, or when does it make sense to let the team make the decision? And sometimes that means - and this is something that's been coming up quite often with really senior leaders - is at times they just have to let the people in their team or their teams make mistakes and learn from them. So from a leadership

challenge perspective in terms of working with teams, trying to get that balance between the teacher, the director, and then the empowerer and the coach, that to me seems, right now, people are struggling a little bit with when and how to get that balance right.

Cec Busby [00:28:21]:

So what about for our listeners? A lot of them are small business owners. They may have started their business as a sole operator and they've gradually expanded. Leadership was probably not something they ever thought they needed to think about when they first started. And you mentioned let your team make mistakes - for a small business, a mistake can be very costly. So how do you kind of balance that? And also how do you develop those leadership skills when you never thought that you would have to lead a team in the first place?

Adrian Baillargeon [00:29:01]:

When it comes to small businesses, I think this is something that all leaders and, typically, it's owners of small business. This is probably something that they may not realize, because when they started the business, they probably started out quite small and might have been on their own. So they were making all the decisions, the only people they were impacting were themselves. They might have had a partner, might have been a family member or somebody else that was involved in the business, and they get to know each other very quickly and very well. So their behaviours didn't necessarily impact more broadly outside of their individual selves. But the reality is as small business start to get bigger, the smallest of their behaviours is noticed. Everything that they do as the business owner, the business leader, people will see it, and it will impact what they do. If they see a leader do something or speak a certain way or react, you know, your body language a certain way, that is going to impact how people think and do within the business. Oh, Cec does that - this is what people are thinking. They may not say it out loud, but they'd be like, oh, that's the way things are done around here. So it's just being where, I think, as the businesses get a little bit bigger outside of the solo flyer, once you start to bring people on, to realize that every little thing you do will have an impact on your group. Now that's not to say, crap, I gotta think about every single thing I do. How do I move? You know, I say one little word, but it is about just understanding the influence that you have.

Cec Busby [00:30:40]:

I think we're almost out of time. So just finally, if readers were gonna take away one thing from your book, what would you hope it is?

Adrian Baillargeon [00:30:48]:

If there's one thing that they took away from *Teams That Swear* Cec, it's this - that complacency is costly. Don't let things just happen by chance, but if you can be deliberate about how your team works together, it will pay big time dividends in the short and long term.

Cec Busby [00:31:06]:

It's definitely true. Thank you so much Adrian, and thanks for your time today. It's been a real pleasure talking to you this morning.

Adrian Baillargeon [00:31:14]:

Right on, Cec. I really feel honoured to be able to have a chat with you and share some of my thoughts with your listeners. So thanks for having me.

Cec Busby [00:31:22]:

Thank you. And where can we buy the book?

Adrian Baillargeon [00:31:25]:

Very simple, teamsthatswear.com

Cec Busby [00:31:30]:

So easy. Thank you, Adrian. Nice talking to you.

Adrian Baillargeon:

Thanks, Cec.