

Leah Mether Flying Solo podcast 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. Now let's face it, uncertainty is part of daily life these days. But when it comes to communication, uncertainty is a no no. Being able to communicate with clarity and empathy are essential business skills. And today's guest, Leah Mether, knows exactly what it takes to do just that. Leah is a communication specialist with a background in journalism and corporate comms and she's here today to share with us her expert advice on how you can become a better communicator and why it will make you a better leader and improve your business. Hi Leah. Thank you for joining me on the show today. Welcome.

Leah Mether [00:00:57]:

Thank you so much for having me. I'm looking forward to this conversation.

Cec Busby [00:01:01]:

My absolute pleasure. Now you're a little bit of a communications expert. You help everything from small businesses to CEOs to big corporations learn how to communicate better amongst themselves and with their team. So where did that interest first come from? What sparked your initial desire to go into that communications conversation field?

Leah Mether [00:01:29]:

Yeah, great question. I actually started my career as a journalist, so it was always about relationships and people and conversations. And then I went into a corporate career for a few years in corporate communications and I actually started my business when I was on maternity leave with my first child. I had three babies in three and a half years and I didn't want that big gap on my resume. So I started consulting and doing what I'd essentially been doing in my corporate life and lots of media, lots of communication consulting. But more and more I had people from big corporates, small businesses, a whole real raft of industries saying to me, but how do I have the difficult conversation, Leah? Or why can't I get on with this person who's got a different style to me? How can I self manage so that I can deal with my own emotions and the emotions of

other people? And when I started looking at it, I realized that actually the people part is the toughest part of most people's role, regardless of what it is. And a big desire to help people do that more effectively really underpinned a change in direction for my business and got me to where I am today.

Cec Busby [00:02:53]:

It's so interesting, isn't it? Because that used to be considered the soft skills and there was not much value attached to them. When in reality, the ability to communicate effectively with people, to listen to your team, to have empathy, all those skills are incredibly vital to be an effective business leader.

Leah Methner [00:03:20]:

They sure are. And I was giggling in the background there because you're spot on for a long time. The soft skills, those non job specific skills like communication, emotional intelligence, leadership, collaboration, they were dismissed as the fluffy extra the nice to have, but not as important as our hard technical skills or the job specific skills we need for a role. And so much so that in fact my first book is called Soft is the New Hard and it's a play on this idea that actually the soft skills are the hard skills. Anyone can learn them, they can absolutely be developed and improved, but they take hard work. They're much harder a lot of the time than going and getting a university degree because they require really honest self reflection and a willingness to be vulnerable and own up to the fact that we have work to do. And it's not just me saying this. The research is coming out worldwide at the moment to say we really dropped the ball as business leaders, as leaders in general, as anyone in any role. We dropped the ball on teaching people the importance of developing these skills and the world really is waking up. The likes of Deloitte, Access, Economics, ComBank, Harvard Business School are all saying the same thing and it's the future is in soft skills. Now, when you first hear that, a lot of people go, but hang on, I thought it was all about Stem science, technology, engineering and maths and AI and things like that and absolutely those things are crucial and a big part of our future. But here's the kicker, folks, the people skills, the human skills are what sets us apart from the robots and they are hard to outsource and automate. So actually, if we want to future proof our businesses and future proof our careers, developing and really strengthening our customer service, our communication, that's actually what's going to set us apart. So it's one of the smartest things we can be doing.

Cec Busby [00:05:33]:

So how much of a setback do you think there was due to COVID? Because people lost that connection, they stopped having those face to face interactions. There's a whole young generation of kids that would have been socialized at school for those first couple of years of schooling that have missed that vital part of growing up and navigating change. How do you think that we've been impacted and do you think we're going to see Ramifications later on?

Leah Methner [00:06:05]:

Yeah, great question. Look, no doubt we have been impacted, but in really different ways. There's not a one size fits all there. I certainly worked with a lot of leaders and teams during COVID online, in an online space, running lots of training about how they could remain connected and communicate effectively during that time. And I did see some leaders and teams do it really well and actually they probably got more connected during that time because we were in each other's homes and learning more about colleagues than we had before. So some teams actually really did it well and grew and strengthened their bonds through that time. But a lot didn't. A lot didn't do it consciously and felt so far out of their depth and weren't willing to do the change adaptation that was needed. And you're right, I've got three young children, those three boys I mentioned earlier, they were in primary school during COVID and it had a huge impact. I think it depended a lot on what was going on in family life, whether it was conscious connections still being made in a different way. We see it, though, I think the change in technology and things like that in every generation I know in workplaces at the moment when I go in, there the real difference in generations between those who are willing to pick up the phone and have a conversation compared to those who that's their worst nightmare, to pick up a phone. They'd much prefer to do it via text message or instant message. But I do think COVID has had an impact. I think that a lot of people forgot how to people. And I think that's one of the main reasons why for those business leaders listening or anyone running their own show, you don't have to have a team around. You, but it's understanding that we have to be intentional and conscious about building those relationships and connections back up and seeing communication and relationship building not as an optional extra, but as actually essential to our influence. Because you might be running a business and be brilliant at what you do, and that's great. And you will get noticed for doing that. However, time and time again you will find that you lose clients or

miss out on business if your communication isn't up to scratch. And a quick example of that was recently for myself when I needed a Tradie and the first Tradie that I tried to hire, they told me to be home at a particular time of day. They didn't turn up. I run my own business so I was put out as I'd had to move clients around. They didn't show up, the communication was poor. So I said don't worry about it and I hired someone else who was more expensive but their communication was on point. So I encourage anyone listening to think about where they can make tweaks to their communication because we are navigating big change and that's obviously the topic of my new book. But communication has to be conscious if we want it to be effective.

Cec Busby [00:09:32]:

Yes. So your new book steer through the Storm. Can you give us a little bit of a rundown of the premise?

Leah Methner [00:09:38]:

Yeah, absolutely. So the new book really came about before COVID so I'd just published that first one. Soft is the new hard on the foundations of communicating effectively. And I was talking to a leader in the power industry here in Victoria where I'm from, the coal fire power industry, which is obviously undergoing huge transition. And he said to me, Leah, have you got anything on change, particularly change that is happening whether we like it or not. And there's not necessarily a win in it for our people. The industry is changing. We're going to lose our jobs and we need to lose our jobs because industries have to transition to a cleaner economy. But it got me thinking about this gap in skill development for people who aren't necessarily the drivers of change. They're not necessarily the decision maker who can manage or lead the change, but they're almost the piggy in the middle who has to lead people. Whether it's clients or staff, they have to lead other people through the change. They have to lead themselves first and then lead others through the change. And then, of course, COVID hit. And as we're talking about huge impact on teams, people, everyone worldwide, and it was watching the different ways leaders navigated that some took their responsibility really seriously and tried to steer their people through the best way possible with a mix of warmth and empathy and still holding people accountable. But I also saw leaders who tried to steamroll their people through, who said things like, right, everyone back in the office tomorrow with no explanation, and then wondered why they had resistance. And also leaders who shirked their

responsibility entirely, who saw it as Well, I didn't create COVID and the government's making these decisions, not me. So I don't have a role to play either. And we've seen what happens when change is led poorly, when people don't step up and steer people through it. And I just don't want to see that happen again. The world is changing at a pace that I don't think we've ever seen before. There's so much uncertainty. So this book is a really practical read with a model that underpins it for how we can all help other people, whether it's in our personal or business lives, to steer through that storm of uncertainty and change.

Cec Busby [00:12:10]:

And uncertainty makes people feel very emotional. So how can we foster trust and connection with our team members, with our family, with our friends? How can we navigate that so that people find it easier to manage that uncertainty?

Leah Methner [00:12:29]:

Yeah. There's five key elements I discuss in the book and I'll just whip through them really quickly for you. The first one is create clarity. Now, you can create clarity for people even in uncertain times when you don't know what the change is or the impact it will have. And the clarity you can create is by asking your team or your family or even yourself, what do I want to be known for through this? This is going to be a really hard time. How do I want to show up? What do I want to be known for as we're navigating this change? What are we going to unite behind as our purpose? We also want to connect with curiosity, and this is absolutely core for building trust. Empathy is allowing people to feel seen and heard. You're acknowledging what's going on for other people. So it is important to get curious about how someone else is feeling. I had a leader say to me recently, Leah, emotion doesn't belong in the workplace and I don't do feelings. And I said, well, that'd be great if people weren't emotion driven beings, but we are. So if you want to be able to help other people navigate uncertainty and change, we have to get curious about how they're feeling and what's going on for them. Because the more we understand them, the better we can lead them through. The third element is challenge with candor. We do have to hold people accountable. So that might be getting really clear on how we want to behave through the uncertainty, yet we're going to be stressed. We are not necessarily going to be at our best, but what's okay and what's not okay. It's okay to be frustrated and anxious. It's not okay though, to take that

out on your colleagues or the people you love by yelling and swearing at them. So get really clear on what those expectations are. Coach with compassion is the fourth element. This is the importance of having those one on one conversations with, again, loved ones, family, colleagues, and it's not trying to solve the problem for them, it's not trying to allay all of their fears, but it's asking great questions to help them find their own answers. So it might be saying to them, this is really hard at the moment. What do you want to be known for as you go through it? Where do you want to be at the end of this? How do you want to be able to say you navigated this time and you can provide that really compassionate coaching to them? And the last element here is the importance of committing with consistency for those who are listening, who are leaders. And again, you might be leading clients, it doesn't necessarily have to be your team. We need to commit with consistency during uncertainty. We are looking for certainty. So if you're behaving in a really inconsistent way where maybe your actions and your words are misaligned or you're a bit all over the place, that can further add to that feeling of real anxiousness and worry and fear because everything else is out of control and now you're not behaving how I expected as well. So really doing that inner work to show up as consistently as possible. Make sure your words and actions are aligned. And if you are communicating to clients, colleagues about the change and about the uncertainty, don't just do it once. Or as one leader said to me recently, oh, but I told them in an email three weeks ago, Leah, and in his mind that was the tick and flick of communicating change. You need to keep banging the drum. If there's uncertainty around you, if there's change happening around you, it's not the time to under communicate. In fact, it's time to really ramp it up.

Cec Busby [00:16:31]:

So a few things I'd just like to touch on from what you were just saying. Firstly, that boss who was like emotion, there's no place for emotion. Resistance, resistance to change. Like he was resisting the change, of wanting to acknowledge that, yes, indeed, emotion.

Leah Methner [00:16:50]:

Part of everyday work.

Cec Busby [00:16:52]:

How do you deal with that? Because obviously a lot of people are resistant to change.

Leah Methers [00:16:59]:

Oh, they are. And it's really normal. And I think that's the first thing we need to realize. Expect people to resist, expect people to react with different emotions, because that's the human experience. Our brains are wired for comfort and certainty. We like to create habits, we like to repeat things. And when we experience change, the primitive part of our brain, the amygdala, it sees it as a threat. So even if it's a positive change, our really basic instinct is to be suspicious, distrustful, resistant and skeptical because we're trying to work out if it's a threat. So that often throws us into Fight, Flight or freeze.

Cec Busby [00:17:43]:

How do we diffuse that innate response? Because as you said, it is innate. Fight Fright Fleet. I can't speak.

Leah Methers [00:17:52]:

Fight Flight or Free. Now I'm doing it, too. Free now. I can't. So it is innate and what, we could so expect it, but it doesn't have to be where we stay. And that's where that framework I just spoke through, in particular, the element I would pull out there is curiosity, that empathy piece and the curiosity, it's not getting sucked into the doomsday picture that another person has, but it's trying to understand what their concern is and what their worry is. Because it may be that when they share their concern or their worry or their reason for resisting the change. And in the book I actually outline eight separate reasons why people resist change and what we can do about it, because it depends on the reason why they're resisting, how we tackle it. It might be that they don't understand the reason for the change. And that means we need to make sure we're upping our communication of the why, why it's needed, how it will impact or benefit them. If there is a benefit, it might be that someone's resisting because they've got change fatigue. And that's certainly something I'm seeing at the moment. People are so exhausted because we've had a number of years with COVID thrown in there of the most disruptive change ever. And now we've got people coming back into businesses going, right, so all those changes that were on hold during COVID now we want to bring them in. And if people are resisting because they are actually feeling pretty cooked, like

they can't take another change, as leaders, we need to go away. And it may be that we do have to implement that change, but maybe we slow it down a bit and go a bit gentler. Or we look at all the changes we'd like to implement and go, you know what? These aren't going to all get over the line at the moment because we are dealing with people and we don't want to break them. We don't want to lose our best assets. So what's my priority for implementing change at the moment? Maybe it's one that needs to be done now and some can get put off, but you won't know how to tackle the resistance until you get curious about what underpins it.

Cec Busby [00:20:18]:

And going back also to that boss that was like, oh, I sent that in an email, I should know about that. That communication clarity piece, which she said is really vital for successful leadership and keep banging the drum and keep reiterating, this is what's going to happen. What are some practical ways we can make sure that the communication is clear? Should it not have been an email to begin with? Should it have been a one to one meeting, a team meeting, face to face, whatever? What would have been perhaps a better way to communicate the change?

Leah Mether [00:20:55]:

Leah and again, great question. And there's not a one size fits all answer because it depends on situation, circumstance, your business, but you at least want to put some thought in beforehand about for this change. What is the best approach? If there's likely to be questions and uncertainty and it's with your team, can you have the conversation in? Maybe it is a team meeting, maybe it's one on ones, maybe it is an email, potentially, but certainly that's not where it ends. You're then making sure you've got conversations in right off the back of that and think about when you've received bad news, whether it's bad health news or news that has shocked you. When you hear that news, you stop listening. Quite quickly, you stop listening and you go into your head on a bit of a spiral, often going, oh my goodness, what does this mean for me? What am I going to do about? And you're not hearing what the doctor or whoever it might be is saying. And we need to remember that this is what happens when we communicate change. And we might have been living with it for months because if it's a change, we're instigating, we're familiar with it, but it's the first time for our team and we have to bring them along. So even if it is an email initially, because that works best for your organization, I would still

challenge that. I think there's a lot of times where it needs to be a conversation, look for different ways. How can I communicate it in different ways? People have different learning styles. How can I provide an opportunity for people to ask questions? How can I do a Q and A? And if it's uncertain, I've got a great little, very simple four part framework that I'd love to share with listeners because what I often find is during change and uncertainty, leaders communicate what they know and the stuff they don't know about the change. They think, oh, I don't know the answer to that, so I'm not going to say anything. But you can bet your bottom dollar that that's the stuff everyone's talking about, that elephant in the room where everyone's going, but what does it mean for this? So the fourth part framework for communicating during uncertainty is this. Start off by telling them, number one, what we know, and be as clear and plain speak as possible. So here's what we know is number one. Number two, and here's what we're doing about it. Number three, and this is the crucial one a lot of leaders leave off. Number three is what we don't know. Here's what we don't know and actually name it. I know that everyone's really keen to know how many I don't know, it might be redundancies or when this change is going to be implemented. And then number four is how and when we'll let you know. So it might look a bit like this. So what's happening is there's a restructure going on and there will be a redundancy program attached to that. What we're doing about it might be something around. So we're going to be making sure we're communicating this over the coming weeks and there'll be more information coming out. Now, number three, what we don't know, it might be something along the lines of, now I know everyone will be thinking, or one of the questions that people will be worried about here is, are there going to be forced redundancies or will they all be voluntary? The answer to that is the answer to that is I don't have all of the information there at the moment because it will depend on how many voluntary redundancies we've got. We're looking to reduce the workforce by this much. I've picked a tough one here, but these are the sort of conversations that are going on and I think that fear of actually sticking your hand up and saying, I know you're all worried about this and I don't have the answer to that, but here's what I'm doing about it. It might be that you don't know if you're going to get government funding again and you know, everyone wants to know about that, but we haven't got the answer yet either. But what I can commit to you is that I will keep asking the questions up the chain. We will keep advocating to government on our behalf, and as soon as we have the answer, we'll let you know. And what this does when you use this framework, what we know, what we're doing about it, what we don't know, and how we'll let you know, is it builds trust with your people. They see you as someone who, yes, you're

prepared to stand there and have the hard conversation and you're not burying or withholding information from them. And that sort of communication, that sort of leadership during uncertainty is really vital if you want your people to stick with you.

Cec Busby [00:26:07]:

So those were kind of very high stakes conversations you were talking about then. But what about the more difficult day to day conversations? Maybe someone's underperforming or maybe there's a mental health crisis. As a business owner or a team leader, you often have to manage these difficult conversations.

Leah Methner [00:26:28]:

Yeah.

Cec Busby [00:26:29]:

What advice would you have for those?

Leah Methner [00:26:32]:

My top advice here, and I have this conversation with so many businesses, is before and I can give a whole heap of tips for having those tricky conversations. And that's a big part of the work I do. But actually avoiding those tricky conversations. Not totally, but is in a lot of ways possible if you have done the work to set really clear expectations with your people. Now, this is something that I know a lot of business leaders don't do well. They wait for the problem or the poor behavior or the poor performance. And then they come to me and they say, oh, Leah, how am I going to have this difficult conversation? That their performance isn't up to scratch. And where I start out with with them is by asking, have you made it clear what good performance looks? And very, very often we have not done that. So if anyone is listening and does have people who work for them, I encourage you to have this conversation. And again, it's not a set and forget conversation. It's not a one time conversation. It's getting together with your team and saying, what does good customer service look like? And being able to name it and explain it and give scenarios and examples in this sort of situation, what would poor behavior look like? And really nutting down. And again, there's some facilitation

strategies on how to do this in the book, but ideally, you want to get your team to a top three to six core behaviors that underpin how you show up and work. Because if you've got those, if everyone is really clear and ideally your team has been part of creating them, then it's so much easier to hold people accountable. So often we come in at the wrong end and we try to hold people accountable and we have this misguided belief that it's common sense or they should know, but we never told them and no one else thinks exactly like us. This goes for when we're assigning tasks or we're taking on a new job for a client, or we're giving a job to a client. So often we don't do the work to communicate really clearly at the front end about what our expectations are, so that then if people aren't meeting the expectations, we can hold them to account.

Cec Busby [00:29:03]:

Is it also about you don't need to wait for those difficult times to be having conversations with your staff, you should be meeting with people regularly, 100%.

Leah Methner [00:29:15]:

Absolutely. And that's what I'm talking about with that shared expectation conversation you don't need actually, don't wait if you haven't done it for a while. Organize a team meeting and say, I realize we haven't checked in for a while. What does it look like? I see this so often, and when I do facilitate this with teams, the leader will often be confident that everyone knows everyone's on the same page. And then as I ask questions like I'm throwing around here, so what does good performance or behavior look like if someone comes in really angry? What's our expectation on how we handle that? You realize people are on really different pages, so get in early. A big mantra of mine is communicate early and communicate often for those listeners who hate conflict and confrontation. And I know there will be a lot of you, a lot of us don't like it. Actually, most people don't like it. But if you don't like conflict and confrontation, avoiding the elephant in the room will not make it disappear. It will make the problem grow and grow and grow. And then you've got a Whopping grade issue you don't know what to do with. So if you want to build relationships with your team and avoid those more tricky conversations, communicate early and often and nip issues in the bud when they're a bit uncomfortable, but they're not the big issues. And you can do that again by just clarifying and checking expectations. It can be, hey, I noticed you went

about this that way. Can you talk me through your thinking behind that? And if you come from a mindset of curiosity, rather than saying, why'd you do that, you did the wrong thing, you open up a dialogue. We've all heard that, right? We open up a dialogue, though when we approach it with curiosity, it might be that you were about to jump down someone's throat for doing what you perceived the wrong thing or the wrong way. And when you approach it with curiosity and say, hey, I noticed you did this, can you talk me through why you approached it that way? Because it's really different to how I'd do it. It might be that the context they give you is they tried five other things and that didn't work. So this is why they're tackling it that way. And by approaching it with curiosity, you've just learned something. Rather than get yourself in a situation that, again, we've probably all been in where you've bitten someone's head off and then you've got to do the backtrack because you didn't have the full picture. Now, even if they give you an answer and you think, no, it really is the wrong way, because you've got curious and asked them to explain it, when you then respond with, okay, so I appreciate that you've tackled it that way for these reasons. However, our procedure here is XYZ. They're more likely to listen to you because you got curious and listened to. Them.

Cec Busby [00:32:14]:

I think we've probably only got time for one more question. So what I'm curious about is if there was only one communication skill that you hope people took away with them from today's listen, what would it be?

Leah Methner [00:32:28]:

Okay. It is going to be take personal responsibility for your own communication and behavior with no room for yeah, but if we want to improve our communication, I think a big mistake a lot of us make is we look for the tip or the trick to have the conversation with the other person. However, improving your communication starts with you, and it starts with you being prepared to get really honest and own and take personal responsibility for the way you show up, the way you communicate and behave regardless of what comes back at you. You have a choice about how you respond to other people and you need to model the behavior you want to see in others. That doesn't mean you don't call out poor behavior when you need to, but you need to make sure that you are taking personal responsibility for you first.

Cec Busby [00:33:25]:

Great advice. Thank you. Leah, thanks so much for joining me on the show today. And your books steer through the storm. Where can we get it? All good bookstores.

Leah Methner [00:33:33]:

All good bookstores. It's available as a paperback, an audiobook and an ebook. So if you're not much of a reader, you can listen instead.

Cec Busby [00:33:41]:

Awesome. Thank you so much.