

The Future of Work podcast is a weekly show where Jacob has in-depth conversations with senior level executives, business leaders, and bestselling authors around the world on the future of work and the future in general. Topics cover everything from AI and automation to the gig economy to big data to the future of learning and everything in between. Each episode explores a new topic and features a special guest.

You can listen to past episodes at www.TheFutureOrganization.com/future-work-podcast/. To learn more about Jacob and the work he is doing please visit www.TheFutureOrganization.com. You can also subscribe to Jacob's [YouTube](#) channel, follow him on [Twitter](#), or visit him on [Facebook](#).

Jacob: Hello everyone, welcome to another episode of The Future of Work Podcast. My guest today is Ashley Goodall. He's the SVP of Leadership and Team Intelligence at Cisco, and he's also the author of a brand new book with Marcus Buckingham, who used to be, or who was a previous guest on the show, and the new book is called *Nine Lies About Work: A Freethinking Leader's Guide to the Real World*, and I had a chance to review the advance copy of that, and I also... Ashley, can you hear the sound of the pages flipping here? I have your-

Ashley: Oh, wow. That's the real sound effect of you flipping through some pages.

Jacob: It is. I have the book sitting here. I was going through it earlier today. You guys did a great job with this. I'm definitely excited to talk about it, so thank you for joining me.

Ashley: Hey, it's great to be here.

Jacob: Well, before we jump in all this fun stuff, why don't we start with just some high level background information about you? How did you get involved with Cisco, and what are you responsible for as the SVP of Leadership and Team Intelligence?

Ashley: Yeah, before I was at Cisco, I spent 14 years at Deloitte and toward the end of my time there I got involved... I mean, my main job for the last few years was leadership development, leadership training, but I also got involved in performance management and trying to invent a way of doing performance management without ratings, which was all, as you know very well, the big topic of conversation back in 2014, 2015, and maybe a little bit before that as well. And then I started talking with Cisco, and Cisco was interested in building a new sort of HR organization because Cisco had seen I think before a lot of people in the world, that the experience on a team is the foundational experience at work, and if companies can get teams right they can get a lot else right that goes with that.

Ashley: So, Cisco asked me to come and create this new organization, which as you said is called Leadership and Team Intelligence, that is focused squarely on what's everything that we can do to create great teams, led by great leaders, informed by great realtime intelligence about what's going on in the work every day? And so that's my current role.

Jacob: Very cool, and I remember that even before you took the job at Cisco, I did a video of Cisco, and didn't you tell me you saw that video a little while ago, when you were even thinking of working there?

Ashley: Yeah. I remember-

Jacob: It was a couple years ago.

Ashley: It was like five minutest long, and it was-

Jacob: Yeah.

Ashley: ... standing outside a meeting room or something?

Jacob: Yeah, I interviewed... I think it was Francine-

Ashley: It was.

Jacob: And a couple other people there.

Ashley: Yeah.

Jacob: It was kind of like an inside look of what it was like to work at Cisco. Good old days, when I had more energy.

Ashley: Yeah. You and me both, I think.

Jacob: And so, today at Cisco, Team Intelligence, I would imagine that you are doing a lot with data, with people analytics, and can you talk a little bit about the role that that plays inside of Cisco, and in the work that you're doing? And then we can jump into those... the nine lies that you talk about in your book.

Ashley: Yeah, sure, and I suppose the way to think through what we do with data analytics, which is by the way a lot, is to start with okay, who needs to act on it? Who's the audience, if you like, but not audience in terms of, "Oh, that sounds nice," but audience in terms of, "I can do something with this." And our primary audience, with all of the data and intelligence that we generate, is actually the team leader, because they are the person who can most easily and effectively do something about it, right?

Ashley: So, we have team level engagement data that team leaders can generate and use to inform their conversations with their teams. We have conversation frequency data, that again, allows a team leader to understand where they are in building relationships in their organization. We have some very simple performance data that again, primary audience is team leader, so that they can track their reactions to a team member's performance over the course of the year. Of course, we also deliver data and analytics to the senior leadership team. That is on a quarterly basis, and actually is essentially the aggregation of all of the stuff that we provide for team leaders.

Ashley: We do a few more things for the senior leadership team involving some very interesting natural language processing, and some analytics of that, but the main sort of thought behind everything that we do, and again, it goes back to why my organization exists in the first place. If you're not serving the team leader, you can't possibly serve the company, so we have to start by saying, "What's the data?" Not, "What's the data for the C-suite and then we'll share it with everybody else," but, "What's the data that the team leader can act on tomorrow?" And then maybe we can roll that up and share it with the senior leaders of the firm, so that they have a sense of what's going on.

Jacob: So, do you guys not do, and I already know the answer to this, so I'm cheating, but it sounds like you guys don't do the typical annual employee engagement survey, the typical annual performance review. You guys got rid of all of that sort of stuff.

Ashley: Yeah. Annual's a little bit slow, isn't it?

Jacob: It is, yeah, and I actually thought it was fascinating when I was talking to Francine. She was... and this was a couple years ago, so you guys have probably made quite a few changes and updates since then, but maybe you can talk a little bit about why you moved away from that stuff, and what did you replace it with, and how has that been working for you?

Ashley: Yeah, so we've probably already touched on the annual engagement survey thing a little bit. I mean, as you look at those, you go, "Well, there are a couple of problems with that as it's sort of done traditionally." Number one is that it's hideously infrequent. Once a year you get to find out how people are doing. I mean, if I said to my wife, "Honey, I'm going to ask you about your experience of this marriage every year on our wedding anniversary, and then I'm going to fall silent for 364 days," I'm not sure what her answer would be, but I don't think it would be complimentary. And yeah, that's what we do at work. We're sort of like, "You know, we care about you a lot, but not enough to see how you're doing more than once a year," so there's a frequency problem.

Ashley: There is also, then, an action problem, because the data is actually delivered to the wrong people. When you do the annual engagement survey, you deliver the results to HR, and HR then synthesizes, and summarizes, and gives them to the senior leadership team, and the senior leadership team then sort of blesses, and dissects, and then rolls them back down to the organization. And so it takes an awfully long time for any sort of insight or action to get back to the only person who can do anything about it, which as we've said, is actually the team leader, so there's an action problem.

Ashley: There's actually a third problem, which is a data quality problem. If you look at the questions in these sorts of engagement surveys, there are typically, I don't know, somewhere between 50 and 75 questions, and if you actually try and draw the line between somebody's answer to one of these questions and some set of outcomes you care about in the world of work, it's impossible to do. So, it's not clear that they're measuring anything that we should pay attention to as a priority.

Ashley: So yes, we stepped away from that. We now have an engagement tool, eight questions, triggered by the team leader whenever they want. Data goes to the team leader as soon as everybody on the team has answered. They get realtime intelligence, they get some coaching tips, digital coaching tips if you'd like, as to how to think through their scores with the team, and the team discusses it together, because it's measuring the local team experience, and so everybody owns that. So, that's sort of where... the from-to on the whole engagement piece.

Ashley: On the performance rating piece, we stopped doing that. Gosh, I think late 2014, maybe even, so a long time back now. And you know, the immediate discovery was of course the sky didn't fall. I think we're still a going concern, as an enterprise, and in fact rather going well concern, if you like. And you know, you discover as soon as you... and I had also been part the removal of performance ratings at Deloitte, so I sort of know how this thing could play out. The sky doesn't fall. It turns out that team leaders don't need ratings to have a point of view on the talent of their team. Neither do they need ratings or nine boxes in order to figure out how they think bonuses should be distributed, or who they think should be up for promotion, or who they think should be selected for a rotational program, or any of those things that we typically think can't possibly happen unless we have a stacked rank of performance rating.

Ashley: It turns out team leaders can do that stuff very well, and in fact, when you get the ratings out of the way, to the extent that we can measure, they do it even a little bit better than when the ratings were there in the first place. And then what we've added at Cisco in the last couple of months, and we're now in the middle of a rolling out, is a different way of doing an organization level review of talent in a rating-less world, that merely again, aggregates the instincts, and decisions, and recommendations of each team leader in a way that we can look up and down the organization and see what our team leaders are telling us about our people.

Jacob: So, let me make sure I understand. So, eight questions, so let's say I'm a manager. I'm a leader at Cisco. Instead of doing this big 100 question engagement survey, I can do this thing anytime I want, and what does it take? I'm guessing a couple minutes, and I get the results back in a day or two, and it just gives me the picture of what I need on my team?

Ashley: Well, so launching it takes... I don't know, if you're particularly slow with a mouse, it probably takes 20 seconds, because it really is... The system already knows who's on your team, because this is the system we use for team activation and team acceleration, so the system knows who's on your team. You just click a button that says, "Okay, let's send them all an engagement pulse," so that's very quick. The system allows two weeks for people to come back, but because they've all just got a note from the boss, not, by the way, from HR or the anonymous third party engagement survey vendor. You remember that thing, right? You get a thing from some masked email address, saying, "This is a survey vendor, please respond to our survey," and you treat it like you do all the other surveys you get from external vendors, which is, "I'll get to it when I've got time."

Ashley: But here you get a note from the boss, an email from the boss saying, "Please complete the engagement pulse," and we see a 75 or so percent response rate to that, and it very rarely runs that two weeks, because people do it very, very quickly. And as soon as you finish doing the survey, email goes back to the team leader, "Here are the results," and you can talk about it on the next team call.

Jacob: I love it. Simple, straightforward, easy to do. Well, that's kind of some high level stuff, and we can talk probably much longer about that, but for people that are interested in that, as I mentioned I did do two podcasts with Francine Katsoudas, where we talked about that in more detail, so I definitely recommend people check that out. But I want to shift gears a little bit, and talk about your new book and some of the insights that you found on there, because I thought they were quite interesting, and the book is called *Nine Lies About Work*. So, maybe we can go through these nine lies, starting off with the first one, which is, "People care which organization they work for," and so maybe you can give us a little bit of insight on that.

Jacob: And by the way, this is all based on data and research that you guys did, right? It's not just your opinion and stuff you're throwing out there.

Ashley: Yeah. I mean, let's clear that one up right up front, shall we Jacob? I think people say very often, "Look, I disagree with your philosophy." To which the response is, there is nothing in here that is a philosophy. There are only findings in here. So, these really are this is what we've managed to find out about the real world work, when we looked as hard as we could at the evidence, and held that evidence up against the sort of received wisdom, if you like, or the commonly accepted truths of work today. That's what we're up to here, and that's at least what we're trying to do.

Ashley: So yes, lie number one, people care which company they work for. Most people, I think confronting that, go, "Well, hang on. Don't I? I think I do. I feel like I do. I feel I care very much which company I work for." You push on it, and you look at the choices that people make, and in fact, if you sort of hypothesize that really the thing I feel the most affiliation for, the sense of belonging to, is the company, then you wouldn't expect to have a great range of, for example, attrition, if you went team by team by team by team. Because each team is part of the company, and either you're going to be part of the company or not part of the company.

Ashley: So, you would expect a very consistent distribution of attrition, and let's say at the same time, other elements of performance. You'd see a consistent distribution of innovation, or creativity, or collaboration, or all these other things. If the company is making your experience of work, and if the company is a sort of monolithic thing, you'd expect that whenever you measure the world of work, you see more or less similarity within a given company, and from one company to the next, maybe a big difference.

Ashley: When you start measuring, you find exactly the opposite thing. You find out that the experience inside a company varies enormously, team by team by team, and hardly at all company to company. So, each company, in other words, is a collection of varied teams, and each company contains variety. One company to the next contains about as much variety. And where you go then is you say, and this is the last little bit. You say,

"Well, what varies with people's experience on a team?" And one thing that varies enormously with people's experience on a team is whether they decide to be on that team in the future. In other words, whether they leave or stay.

Ashley: And we discovered at Cisco, I mean I think this data point is the one that sort of puts the whole thing into a fairly sharp focus, if you go from one of our 50% most engaged teams to one of our 50% least engaged teams, in other words, you pass the sort of median point of team engagement in a downward direction, your chance of voluntarily resigning from Cisco goes up by 45%.

Jacob: Wow, that's huge.

Ashley: It's vast, right? That's an enormous, enormous, enormous difference. And the point is, of course, as you go from a great team to a horrible team, you're still working for Cisco, so if it were true that you cared which company you worked for, that hasn't changed. But clearly, every time what trumps this idea of company is team. So, the truth is people care which team they're on. That's the difference, and what that means in terms of implications for the world of work is we've got to get really serious about teams. Not because there are a lot of them, although there are, but because that's where we are creating the experience of work for our people, or not.

Jacob: Based on the findings from this, and actually, maybe this will kind of be a good format for the other questions, as well. So, after you figured this out, what changes, if any, did you make at Cisco?

Ashley: That connects back to a bunch of the stuff that we were talking about a little while ago, Jacob. The first thought is we need to orient a lot of things to serve the team and the team leader. That's the right focus for a lot of investment in providing great data, in training, in allowing people to measure their experience, in teaching people how to build a great team, in studying great teams and figuring out what they're like. So many, many, things that might have been focused in many different directions, we have now pointed them all at the question of great teams and great team leaders. I think that would be the first thing.

Ashley: And then the second thing, or maybe it's sort of click into that, is that we recognize that one of the most important decisions a company ever makes, maybe even the most of all, is who do you make the team leader? Because so goes the team leader, very often so goes the team. It's not a one on one relationship, but certainly the team leader has a hugely disproportionate impact on the experience of the team. So, you start imagining leadership to be, as a good first approximation, team leadership. And we talk about that. So, we don't talk about leaders now, we talk about team leaders. We talk very little about employees. We talk about team members. We've shifted our mindset, and our language, and our investments, and our learning, and our data, as hard as we can, to address teams and their leaders as job one, if you like.

Jacob: I'm not sure if you're able to share anything on this, but have you identified what makes a successful team leader inside of Cisco? And if so, are you able to share any of what those qualities or characteristics are?

Ashley: Yeah, I can give you three right off the bat. Firstly, you don't judge the team leader, you judge the team that they create, because the measure of a team leader is the experience they create for their team, right? So, that's a sort of flip that maybe we're not quite used to. You know, we did a study in, I'm going to guess 2016, I think was early 2016, to figure out what constituted the best teams at Cisco. We found three things. Our best teams are the ones where team members report that they disproportionately play to their strengths every day, where their teammates have their backs, so they have a sense of safety and trust, and where they feel they share with their teammates a vision of excellence, so we have a shared sense of excellence on this team.

Ashley: Those were the three things that floated to the top here. Individual use of strength, collective support, collective safety and trust, and collective understanding of what it is that we're trying to make together, and what matters most in doing that. That was the data. And by the way, that sort of sits on, as you know very well, probably 20 years or so of data into what constitutes the best teams, and the ... You know, I'd done some of that at Deloitte. My co-author, Marcus Buckingham's been doing this for a number of years. What always seems to rise to the top of the pile is I get to use my strengths every day. That's the one that is A, most powerful, and B, weirdly, again back to an earlier part of our discussion, very often is interpreted as a philosophy, that wouldn't it be nice if we all got to do what we do best every day?

Ashley: And as I said before, it's actually a finding. The best teams are characterized by the use of strengths, and you can react to that by going, "Well, that's soft." Or, "That's sappy," or, "That's not a hard thing." Or you can react to that by going, "Okay, we should lean into that." But whatever your reaction, that is actually the finding in the real world.

Jacob: And would you say ... Well, and the reason I ask is I know that other companies, like Google, they were I think famous... What was it called? Project Oxygen, or project-

Ashley: Yeah, that's it.

Jacob: Aristotle?

Ashley: No, I think it was Oxygen, wasn't it?

Jacob: Oxygen. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And what I found interesting is that they did a study on their managers, their team leaders as well, and they published all these interesting insights, and a lot of organizations were just kind of taking that, and copying it, and assuming that it would be the same at their company, and my question for you is do you think that a lot of these characteristics of what makes a great team leader... Just because somebody's a great team leader at Cisco, do you think that they would also be a great team leader at any other company? Or are some of these things company specific? Or environment specific, maybe?

Ashley: I think we could overdo the environment specificity bit. It almost lets us off the hook in a way. So, I would say a few things. The best team leaders seem to be intensely focused on the people on the team and the experience that they are having. That would be thing one. There's a thing in the book where we talk about the hypothetical world's worst manager. If you want to be the world's worst manager, it's... We know. The research is very clear how to be the world's worst manager. What you do is ignore your people. Don't even talk to them, and you will be the world's worst manager. Because we wither without attention as people, so we know that decent team leaders are really laser focused on what's the experience I'm making for this team.

Ashley: Then they seem to be able to do a couple of different things. They seem to be able to see each individual for who they are, and connect that individuality, that uniqueness of a person, to some useful piece of work that the team is doing together. So, they seem to be able to see people and see value in what's different about people. And then they also seem to be able to universalize the future. Make everybody on the team feel like they are in something together and going somewhere important together.

Ashley: I don't think those are Cisco specific things, and in fact, we see those at Cisco. We saw the same sort of things at Deloitte, and we see them in the Gallup company publishes every few years the latest meta analysis of these studies that have been done globally for years and years and years, and those things keep rising to the top. So, I think if you're a... sort of have a serious research bent, the way that you think about evidence is you look for replication, replicatability of studies, and you also look for evidence, research that builds on earlier evidence, because that's the way that we build our understanding of the world.

Ashley: And so these sorts of things have been around for a long time, and they seem right now to pass both of those tests pretty well.

Jacob: Well, let's jump into the second lie, because this alone is probably one that we could talk about for a long time, and I want to make sure we get through all nine. The second one, or the second big lie that you found is that the best plan wins. So, maybe you can unpack that one a little bit.

Ashley: Yeah, so we spend a lot of time planning, and the sort of characteristics of plan are there's a small group of people who sits together, looks at a bunch of data, goes through a series of meetings, during which time goes by, and then turns around and says, "All right, everybody else, here's what you need to do."

Ashley: Couple of problems with that. Number one, time goes by, so the world that you're living in at the beginning of the planning process might well be different from the world that you're emerging to in the fresh light of day at the end of your planning process. You are sort of planning for the recent past, if you like. And then of course, the second one is that if you make your plan detailed enough that you're actually telling people what to do, it becomes really unwieldy, whereas if you make your plan very vague, it is very vague. And sort of getting it just right, so that you are able to say at the scale of an organization, "Go and do this next, and then do this, and then do this, and then do this," is actually a very, very hard thing to do.

Ashley: You look at the best organizations and they are spending more of more of their time not so much in a drawn out planning process, but in investing in realtime intelligence, in what we call intelligence systems, so dashboards, war rooms, meetings, rituals, with groups of people just doing two things with great frequency. Sharing what they see in the world in front of them, so their peers know what's going on, and then talking about it together. What we say in the book, "Making sense of it together," so the intelligence emerges from a team of people together, looking at realtime information.

Ashley: And then once they... Once a group of people has a really clear understanding of what's going on in the world that they confront every day, they're more than capable of figuring out what to do for themselves. So, if you like, the alignment of an organization is an emergent property, if you build what we can an intelligence system. So, just to close the thought, it's not true that the best plan wins. It is true that the best intelligence wins.

Jacob: Yeah, I like that, and this goes back to the theme that we talked about originally, which is this idea of data, with people analytics, and I know that you guys have been doing a lot, but do you have a sense of just in general, how well are organizations doing when it comes to this? Are they still very much lacking behind the data science piece?

Ashley: I think there's a lot of good work going on in HR analytics. I think at the same time, I'm not sure that we're clear enough on who the consumer of that analytics should be. So, we talked at the beginning of the conversation about the consumer of this needs to be the team leader. If it doesn't serve the team leader, it's not going to serve anyone else in the organization. I would guess, although I haven't sort of gone into the weeds on this recently, but I would guess that the preponderance of people analytics stuff is still primarily focused at the top of the house, at senior leaders, and I think the shift that needs to happen next is to understand that intelligence, realtime intelligence about what's going on, intelligence about the team, intelligence about engagement on the team, all of that has to be delivered to the people on the front lines with high frequency.

Ashley: And the right frequency, by the way, is to think about how fast these things could change. It's not much use having a thermometer to tell you the temperature outside if you only look at it once a year, because if you look at it on the 15th of December every year, you're going to live your life believing it's kind of chilly out. So, there's a lot of conversation right now about what's the right frequency, for example, of a check in, which is a sort of one on one intelligence ritual, if you like. I talk to my team leader, we make sense of the world together. What's the right frequency of that? And people are saying, "Well, you know what? We should have a quarterly check in."

Ashley: To which my response would be, "Gosh, if you're working in an industry where nothing changes materially over the course of three months, or things only really change on a three month cadence, I'm not sure I know which that industry is." You need to talk to your people about the work on the frequency with which the work changes, and it's hard to argue that that time period is much longer than a week. The example in the book of a sort of organizational scale intelligence system is Stan McChrystal, in 2003 in Iraq, and Stan was having an intelligence ritual, a daily call for 7,500 people, and it was daily. It was every single day, because the world was changing that fast.

Ashley: So, when you start thinking through, and when you start thinking in terms of intelligence systems, your first question is, "How frequently does the world that we need to pay attention to change?" That gives you the frequency of the conversation, and then the content of the conversation is, "What do we see, and what does it mean?" And those are joint activities, not activities for a group of planning and strategy specialists somewhere off in corporate HQ, who are going to think about it for three months, and then tell the rest of the company what to do.

Jacob: The next one you have on here is the best orgs cascade goals, and clearly that is a big lie, so what did you guys find out around that one?

Ashley: So yeah, the best companies cascade goals. What did we find out? I have spent a large portion of my life in large organizations, and that's actually what I love to do. I'm very, very curious about what big companies, big organizations are like on the inside. And so I have, for years and years, been on the receiving end, if you like, of a cascaded goal process, and so I think this chapter actually probably started with us saying, "Well, what does that process actually feel like?" And it feels something like this: Someone tells you it's goal setting season, and your first thought is, "Well, that's nice. It's nice that goal setting has a season. Work doesn't seem to have a season. Work is a river. It just keeps on flowing. But it's nice that goals have a season."

Ashley: And then you get, ultimately you get your boss's goals, and you have to line your goals up against your boss's goals. And as you're doing that, you're thinking, "Yeah, but I already know what I'm going to do. It's not like I've been sitting on my hands since the beginning of goal setting season, to wait for my goals to arrive at me, and my chance to fit in my goals so that I can then understand what I might do tomorrow." So, you're already sensing that goals and work are two different things. There's something... I already know what the work is when I come to set the goals.

Ashley: And then, of course, you have to set the goals very, very carefully, because they have to look as though they're really hard, so you're really trying, but you don't want them to be really hard, in case you miss them, because you know that a year from now, someone's going to evaluate you against them, and that will determine a lot of things that you care very much about. So, you're trying to make them just stretchy enough, and again, that's not something we do with work. Work is work.

Ashley: I don't sort of sit down at the beginning of the day and go, "Gosh, you know what? It's Tuesday. I want to make Tuesday just the right degree of difficulty for me, so that it looks like this to somebody else." It's a weird thought. That's what we do with goals. And then, of course, time goes by, and you're evaluated then at the end of the year, and you have to write your self evaluation under these things, and now you have to go, "Hmm. If I claim that I hit them all out of the park, everyone will think I'm diluted or arrogant, so I can't do that, and the same time, if I say I missed them all, I won't get very much money, and I won't get the promotion I've been waiting for, so I can't do that."

Ashley: So, you go through this sort of delicate positioning, to try and figure out how should I say for each goal, "I got most of it, and goodness me, I'm a good corporate citizen because I'm still trying to improve, and here's the thing I learned about." By the time

you get to this stage, goals and work have separated paths a year ago. Goals really have very little to do with work. Goals are a system of... Well, I'm actually not very sure what they're a system of. Work is a system of work, clearly. Goals are a sort of weird exercise in political positioning, and self evaluation, and gaming, that it's very hard to argue that they create a lot of value.

Ashley: If you then look at the science of goals, you find out the goals don't necessarily stimulate great performance. Goals are a horrible evaluator of performance, and goals are a horrible way of tracking performance, as well. Largely because they don't actually contain very much work. So, the chapter starts by saying, "If you push into cascaded goals, you find they do none of the things that we think they do," and that, I suppose, should bother us.

Jacob: What is a cascading goal, for people that are not familiar with it? And what do you recommend doing instead?

Ashley: Yeah, so a cascaded goal is where a senior person says, "Here are my goals," and then their team has to look at the leader's goals, and set a mini version of each goal. So, my team leader says X, and I have to go mini X, and then my team looks at my mini X, and they have to go mini-mini X, and then their teams look at theirs, mini-mini-mini X. So, it's like you take a few organization wide goals, and you slice and dice them as you move down the layers of the hierarchy. That's sort of classic cascaded goal system. There are some variants on that, but that's sort of the normal way it's done.

Ashley: The best companies do actually cascade something. The thing to do instead, here. It's not goals, it's not telling people what to do, it's telling people why. The best companies cascade meaning, and you see this in the stories they tell, you see this in the rituals that they practice. What do they do frequently that people pay a lot of attention to? And you see it in the values that they talk about time and time again. You see it in their expressed values. And the best companies have figured out that to the extent that every employee can keep bumping into reminders and reinforcers of what matters here the most, they can figure out what to do to advance that mission. To take that hill, if you like.

Ashley: Cascaded goals presume that people won't know how to take the hill, so we'll just give them a set of actions and we'll never talk about the hill. Cascaded meaning says, "If we talk lost about the hills that matter to us, a bunch of smart people who we hired will figure out all for themselves how to get up those hills, and they will know it better than we will, because they're right there at the scene of the action."

Jacob: I like it. So, don't cascade the goals, instead, focus on cascading the purpose and meanings that everybody understands why you're doing it.

Ashley: Exactly.

Jacob: Okay. Oh, that's-

Ashley: Exactly.

Jacob: I like that, and you're right. I mean, we don't typically see too much of that. I mean, I can maybe think of a couple companies that do a decent job there, but I think you're right. In most companies, it's just very much about those goals, and trickling them down throughout the company, and not spending enough time looking at the deeper stuff.

Ashley: Yeah, I mean the trick is that to really cascade meaning, you've gotta let go of a sort of one and done mindset. I think there are... The thing I've seen many, many times in my career is a company saying, "All right, well we should write down our values, and our mission statement," and about three weeks of work goes into making this beautiful slide, and it gets flashed up at the all hands once, and then everyone's like, "All right, well we've done that now. Everybody understands what we stand for in the world, so we've done cascading meaning." If you look at the companies who are great at cascading meaning, they're not one and done. It's every week. It's reinforced pervasively. It's in the all hands, but it's also in the communications after the all hands. It's also in what the teams choose to talk about in the team meetings. It's also in the crazy things like the design of the lobby.

Ashley: It's threaded through every element of the organization, so that you bump into it wherever you go. That's the trick.

Jacob: One of my favorite things when I speak at conferences, when companies bring me in, oftentimes one of the things I like to ask them are their corporate values. And very few people inside of organizations, I find, even know what their corporate values are. And I just find that to be so interesting, that these companies tout these values, and it's all over their career pages. You should work here because these are our values, but the employees themselves who work there don't even know what those values are. So, clearly, there's kind of a big gap there going on.

Ashley: Well, yeah. It's funny, but you know, without naming names, I think a lot of those sort of corporate values are a bit muzak, aren't they? I mean, it's a very similar list of worthy aspirations. I think, actually, the beauty of it when done brilliantly is the way that the values are expressed, the way that meaning is expressed, becomes part of that meaning. I'll give you one example in case that's a bit abstract.

Ashley: If you go to In and Out Burger, and you go into the drive through lane, and you look to your left, you see a window. Now, in every other fast food chain in the world, when you go through lane and look to your left, you see a wall, because they don't want to show you the kitchen, because they don't want you to see your food being made. In In and Out Burger, they put a window, so that you can look through and see the fresh lettuce, and the ripe tomatoes, and the fresh bread all being cooked right now. Because they-

Jacob: Getting hungry. Getting very hungry.

Ashley: Sorry about that, because their value is freshness.

Jacob: Yeah.

Ashley: Now, A, freshness doesn't get written on the corporate value thing, and B, if you wrote it there, it would be boring. But C, if you show the world by putting a window in the drive through lane, so everyone can see it, you can't miss, as an employee of In and Out Burger, or as a customer, this is the value, because look, we're showcasing it through our enormous window.

Jacob: Yeah. I love that example, and I actually there's an In and Out not too far away from me, and I notice that there, as well, and you don't see that at any other fast food restaurant chain.

Jacob: Myth number four, and we'll probably have to go through these a little bit quicker. I know I'm lagging on my end, here. Myth number four is the best people are well rounded, which I think a lot of people are going to be surprised by that one.

Ashley: So, let me try and just describe that for you very quickly, because yes, we could be at this for another three and a half hours today. What does this look like? We like to fill in our gaps. We think development comes from figuring out where you are the most lacking, in whatever set of skills, and bringing yourself up to scratch, if you like, on those skills. Which implies that to improve, you become more well rounded, which implies that the best people are well rounded.

Ashley: And you see this in school, where we think about grades, and we pay most attention to the low grades our kids come home with, and not attention to the high grades. We see it at work, where we measure you against... We give you a 360 against the competency model, and tell you that your areas for development are the areas you've scored lowest in. And you know, it's shot through our thinking about people that you improve people by fixing what doesn't work, which is fine until you look at people who are really good at what they do, and you find out that they don't spend a whole bunch of time fixing what doesn't work. They spend much more time making more powerful what already does work.

Ashley: And it turns out that development, growth as a human being, is a question not so much of adding ability where you have none, but a question of added impact where you already have ability. You look at the best people in the world, and you find they're not well rounded. They're spiky. They are really good at a few things, and they've honed them over time to create the biggest impact that they can.

Jacob: I love it. Simple, straightforward. Next one, and maybe we can spend a little bit longer on this one, because this one, when I was reading through this one in the book, I was like, "Wait a minute. This contradicts everything that an organization-"

Ashley: Pretty much everything, right?

Jacob: Yeah. I mean, companies talk about this non-stop, and the next one is ... The next lie is that people need feedback. So, I'm sure a lot of people listening to this are going to be

like, "Okay, Ashley's out of his mind." So, what do you mean by people need feedback? Why is that a lie?

Ashley: Was that feedback for me, by the way?

Jacob: Never.

Ashley: Firstly, what's the sort of common practice right now? We hear a lot about radical candor, and fierce conversations, and unvarnished feedback, right? So, there is a... Gosh, our job is to tell people where they're falling down, and if we don't do it, no one will, and if we don't tell them where they're falling down, they can not possibly prosper. That's the lie.

Ashley: You begin to see the truth when instead of asking the question, "How should we give you feedback," we ask instead the question, "How do human beings grow?" How do you grow? Because this whole... The whole thought behind feedback has to be surely that we're trying to do this to help people grow, and you find out a few things pretty quickly. You find out that when I say the word feedback to you, or when you feel you're about to be judged by me, or criticized in some way, your brain leaves the conversation.

Jacob: Oh, yes.

Ashley: Your brain is in fight or flight mode. It's gone. So, while it might feel good for me to tell you what's wrong with you, Jacob, your brain isn't there to hear, because it went, and it's also not there to grow, of course, because it's trying to get away-

Jacob: Just check out. You're just mentally... You're mentally gone.

Ashley: You're mentally gone, or you're mentally impaired, actually, if you look at the brain science, because your brain is going, "Let this be over, let this be over, let this be over, let this be over. What are they saying? I know I'm meant to listen, but this isn't very pleasant. Let this be over." That's actually what's going on.

Ashley: So, you find that out, and then you also find out, you ask the question when do people actually grow, when do brains grow, and you find out that we grow by adding to things we can already do. Brains actually grow synaptic connections where they already have synaptic connections. So, we get more refined at doing the things we're already pretty good at, and so the challenge to help somebody grow is to help them understand their own pre-existing patterns of behavior, to understand which ones are most effective, to become conscious of those effective patterns of behavior, so that they can amplify them. And philosophy aside, the finding is that that's what human growth looks like at a neurological level.

Ashley: And so, you sort of come full circle, and you go, "Well, okay. There are a few things, of course, where if you are falling down, we need to be able to tell you, but we've gotta be very careful about what they are." If you're missing a fact, we can tell you the fact. If you're missing a step in a process where everybody agrees that, you know, if you're a

nurse, giving a safe injection contains the following 10 steps and you miss one, of course we can say, "Look, you missed a step." We are in that, not helping you learn. We're just mistake fixing, and preventing poor outcomes.

Ashley: We can also, say if you missed the outcome, we can say, "Look, you didn't deliver on the thing we all agreed you were going to deliver on. How might you do that better in the future?" That's fine. But if you want someone... If you do all of those things, if you are forever remediating performance, you don't get great performance. You just get adequate performance. Most of us would say that we're in the excellence game, whether we're in corporations, or sports teams, or families. We're all trying to do our best to build excellence, and our mistake fixing tools are not the same as our excellence making tools. Our excellence making tools need to look like sharing your reaction when something worked brilliantly well. When somebody did something really well, you don't by the way judge it. You don't say, "That was good." You say, "I loved that." That's a hell of a lot of difference, because the second one is a reaction. The first one is a judgment. And your goal is to help people figure out what's really working, so they can figure out how to do it more.

Jacob: The next one you had is people can reliably rate other people is a big lie, and this is another one. This idea of rating and reviewing people is huge, whether we look at managers reviewing employees, or 360 ratings and reviews, it feels like our entire foundation inside of organizations is based on people rating each other, and reviewing each other. So, why is this a big lie?

Ashley: You're right that we base a lot of stuff on people rating other people, and I think it's because we feel very strongly our truths about other people, if you'd like. I know what I think of this person, and so if I rate them, that will be in some way truth, of them. You look at the data, you discover no, that's just truth of you. That's who you are as a rater, what you understand the question to mean, how you use a rating scale, whether you're a strict rater or a lenient rater, whether you have a big spread of scores or a narrow spread of scores. Getting on for two thirds of the rating variance in these sort of systems is explained by the person doing the rating, by the rater, not by the ratee.

Ashley: It's a thing known as the idiosyncratic rater effect. It's been documented very well in the social sciences for a couple of decades, now. But yet, we at work, we pretend as though my ratings of you are good data. They're not. They're bad data. If we want to fix it, there are only a few things where I'm a reliable witness, and two of them are my experiences, my future intent, what I'm going to do, what decisions I would make. I'm good at telling you how I feel and where I'm going, in other words. I can't tell you very much, reliably by the way, about whether I'm good at things. This is why three quarters of people think they're above average drivers, when that is ridiculous on its face.

Ashley: But I can tell you what I'm about to do, and how I feel about something, and so we need to redesign how we measure in organizations, and I'll just give you a super quick example. If we're talking, say, about communication skills, and we want me to assess your communication skills, if we say, "Ashley, rate Jacob's communication skills. One low, five equals high." You don't get good data. Firstly, I use a scale idiosyncratically. Secondly, what does communication skills mean? It's actually a little bit abstract.

However, if you change the question and say, "Ashley, when Jacob speaks, do you understand what he means?" Now I'm rating me. Do I understand what you mean? All of a sudden my measurement is reliable. It's also much more specific, because it's not opining on some abstract set of skills. It's just saying, "Do I understand what you mean?"

Ashley: If you start measuring like that, you get good data, and also, by the way, super actionable data. If I tell you we've done a survey and you don't have good communication skills, you're like, "I don't know what that means." But if I come to you and say, "Hey, Jacob. We ran the survey with your whole team, and three of them, when you speak, they don't know what you mean," you can go, "Oh, great. Let me talk to them and figure out why and what to do about it." So, that's the shift that we need to make.

Jacob: So, it's not... It seems like it's knowing which questions to ask, so that you have the right information and the right data, as opposed to just kind of like on a scale of one to five, how good is Jacob's communication skills.

Ashley: It's about flipping the question, so that you're always asking people to evaluate their own reaction and experience to somebody else in the world, not evaluate the somebody else.

Jacob: Got it. Got it. Okay.

Ashley: That's the difference.

Jacob: And last three, I'm hoping we'll get to all three. Number seven, which is another great one. The big lie is that people have potential. You're breaking my heart with these, Ashley. What do you mean by this one? Why is this a lie?

Ashley: Well, I hope this isn't heartbreaking, because the thing about people have potential is that only certain people do, right? The way we treat this inside big organizations is we have to sort people into high pos and low pos, or no pos, and we give all the goodies to the high pos, and we give as little... not very much of anything to the low pos, because we think that potential is a thing, it lives in a human being, it's inherent in that human being, it walks around with them, and once you're a high po, forever a high po.

Ashley: Firstly, that isn't supported by any evidence in the real world about the human potential to grow. All brains can grow, and they continue to retain the ability to grow throughout life. Secondly, from a sort of maximization standpoint, it's sort of strange for a big organization to say, "Our people are our most important asset," and then in the next breath turn around and discard half of them as people who have no merit and no potential. This is a very strange thing to do if you're trying to maximize the talent you have. You look at the evidence, and you realize that people have a couple of things. They have who they are, unchangingly, what you call in psychometrics traits. Particularly their strengths and their aspirations, which change not very much, or at least on a very slow clip. And then they have how they're moving through the world, how fast are they acquiring different skills and experiences, how is their performance changing over time.

Ashley: You can think of these two things, the first, the who you are, as mass, if you like, and the second, how fast you're moving, is velocity. And to just continue the physics metaphor, when you combine mass and velocity, what you get is momentum, which is a much more useful word and concept than potential, because while we finish up saying, "Only certain people have potential," I think we can very truly say that every person in the world has momentum, and our challenge is not to figure out whether or not they have it, but is it pointed in a direction that they like, and that we like, and are we talking about do we want to change the direction of your momentum, do we want to change the intensity, the speed of your momentum? Do we want to think about how to take, allow that momentum to carry you in one direction or another?

Ashley: That's a question you can have with any human being, and it's a pragmatic, reality-based conversation.

Jacob: Last two. Number eight, work life balance matters most, and this is another one. We hear a lot about work life balance, we hear about work life integration. There are a lot of different concepts and terms being thrown around here. So, why is work life balance matters most a lie?

Ashley: I think it's an unattainable idea, and I think we should be very careful about phrases which when people think about them, take them into a weird place. It implies that, I think, that most things in work are bad, and that most things in life are good, and so the one can offset the other, and gosh, when work gets a little bit much, let's just sprinkle on a little bit more life, and then everything will be back in balance again. And I don't know about your experience, but my experience is some things at work are fantastic, and some things in life can drag you down a little bit.

Ashley: I mean, it is April the 15th next week, we do actually all have to file our taxes, and I'm not sure that that's something many of us look forward to ever so much.

Jacob: What are you talking about? I love taxes.

Ashley: You love taxes?

Jacob: Oh, man. My favorite time of the year.

Ashley: Your favorite time of the year. Well, best of luck with that.

Jacob: Thanks.

Ashley: So, firstly I think the categories are wrong, and secondly, the notion of balance. We're saying let's aspire for a fragile state of just momentary stasis. It's almost as though if you actually made it, your thought would be, "Oh my God, it's a Thursday afternoon. I have work and life in perfect balance. For God's sake, no one move, because then you'll upset the balance, and I'll have to begin my Sisyphean task of pushing my balance rock up a hill again.

Ashley: More useful is the idea that whether it's in work or in life, there are certain activities that fill us up, that rejuvenate us, that express who we are as people, where we want to make our biggest mark on the world. Activities that replenish us, activities that express, if you like, our love for the world around us, and that it's not really work life balance that we should be after, therefore, it is love loathe imbalance. We want to intelligently work throughout our lives to create more of the activities that we love, and fewer of the activities we loathe, whether that's at work, our outside work. Whether it's... I don't know, paying the taxes or filing the taxes, I suppose.

Jacob: I love that different distinction, because you're right. A lot of people just assume that the work stuff has gotta be the bad stuff, and the life stuff has gotta be the good stuff. But it's really just about how do you minimize the things that you hate doing, and focus more on the things that you like doing, and this is actually something that comes up in a lot of debates with AI and technology in the future, and a lot of people say when we think about the future of work in jobs, it's more important for us to think about not the either elimination or creation of jobs, but making sure that we create jobs that people actually want.

Jacob: So, creating more... Not just creating jobs for the sake of creating them, but creating things that people actually want to do, so kind of more of that good. I think that's definitely an important distinction, and-

Ashley: For sure.

Jacob: I suppose it also depends, it requires a little bit of self awareness, as well. So, you as an individual need to know what drains you, what excites you, what motivates you, what stresses you out.

Ashley: Yeah, I mean the funny thing is no one else can tell you those things. You're the only person on the planet right now who knows what lights you up. So, if you don't do the work, no one else can do it for you, and it's not that they don't want to, it's that they actually can't.

Jacob: Yeah. Nobody knows or is going to look out for you but you, so you got to know these things yourself. Last one, and we're just about done, so I'm glad we made it to number nine. And this one is of particular interest for me, because this is the topic of my next book. It's looking at leadership of the future, so what is leadership going to look like over the next 10 years, and your myth here, myth number nine is leadership is a thing. So, what do you mean by that?

Ashley: All right, how long do we have, Jacob? You better tell me.

Jacob: As much time as you want.

Ashley: Okay. Where to begin on this one? When we talk about leadership, we typically focus on the person of the leader, and we typically focus on the list of attributes that we think a good leader, or an adequate leader, or an accomplished leader has. These are things like

strategic thinking, like execution, like learning agility, change agility, change management, authenticity, vulnerability, empathy, you know the sorts of things on the list, and there is in fact it seems a sort of fairly substantial cottage industry of folks trying to figure out what are the perfect list of things on the leadery thing list, so that we can measure leaders against them and figure out whether you're a good leader or not.

Ashley: It's another one of these theories of work that sort of looks good on paper, but starts to fall apart the second you look at the real world. Once you look at real leaders in the real world, you find out that, goodness me, it seems to be difficult to find a leader who has all of the things on the leadership things list. You look at... I don't know, you look at someone like George Patton, for example. Second World War general who was caught physically assaulting some of the soldiers under his command, who had PTSD, and you're like, "All right, if leadership is about ethics, then George Patton isn't a leader." But clearly, he was a leader of some sort.

Ashley: You look at... I don't know, you look at Kennedy, keeping his illnesses and his affairs secret from people around him, and you go, "All right, well if authenticity is part of leadership, then how can Kennedy be a leader?" But clearly, Kennedy was a leader in some way.

Ashley: You keep going like this, you can find a well known leader in the world who's the opposite of every single element on the list of leadership qualities.

Jacob: I like your Steve Jobs example in the book. I actually didn't know that, that he used to... what is it, get a new car every six months, to avoid paying... what fees was he paying? Like registration fees, or-

Ashley: Yeah, so it's... The full story is in Walter Isaacson's wonderful biography of Jobs, but the story is that he used to buy a new car every six months, because then he wouldn't have to get permanent plates for it, so he would only have temporary tags, and then he could park it in the handicap spot without getting a ticket. And you go, "Well, you know, if leadership is about, I don't know, integrity, or ethics, or any of these things, then Steve Jobs wasn't a leader," but clearly Steve Jobs was a leader. Clearly, Steve Jobs was a leader.

Ashley: So, when you look at the leadery thing list, you find out it doesn't really help you explain the real world. But then you look at leaders in the real world and you go, "Oh goodness me, there is exactly one thing that they have in common, but my goodness me, there's only one thing that they have in common," and it's followers. They have followers. You're a leader because you have followers, and for no other reason. And the question then, you have to then pivot your mind, and stop looking at the person of the leader, and start looking instead at the experience of the followers. The question in this whole discussion is why on Earth would I follow somebody? Why do we follow somebody? Why do we entrust our future to some other human being? It's a big act to make, if you like, as a human being, to give your breath to another, if you'd like. Why do we do that?

Ashley: And we do it because one of the things that we followers have in common is uncertainty about the future, if you like, a slight fearfulness of what's around the corner, and what we... We choose to follow somebody if they lessen that uncertainty for us, if they make us a little bit more confident about the future, and what we see in them that makes us confident about the future is just that they're really good at something we care about. We talked earlier about the best people are spiky. The best leaders are spiky, too. They're really good at a few single abilities, and that's what the followers hook onto, and the sorts of things that they're good at, those don't show up in the model.

Ashley: Leadership is actually not a thing. Following spikes is a thing. The truth is that we, the followers, follow spikes, and that's a much more useful understanding of how the world works, if you like.

Jacob: Well, I wish I could ask you more questions about that, but we've already gone a couple minutes over, so I guess what people are going to have to do if they want to learn more is they're just going to have to grab your book. So, where can people learn more about you, the research that you did, the book, anything that you want to mention for people to check out, please feel free to mention it.

Ashley: Yeah, so the book is available in all the places that you would think of where you would go to buy a book, online and in bookstores, and available now. And then the other resource that I would point folks to is we have a website up called The Freethinking Leader Coalition, at freethinkingleader.org, and there me and my co-author, Marcus Buckingham, we've been creating a series of videos which goes in more detail into each of these nine lies. And so with a... If you order the book, you can then put your order number into our website, and begin to explore these things.

Ashley: So, those would be the resources, but I do encourage folks to buy the book. We put a huge amount into writing it. We had a great time writing it, and we're very proud of the ideas in there, and the difference that they can make in the world.

Jacob: And actually even at the end of the book, you also include... I'm just flipping through it right now, since it's in front of me, but you also included some additional interesting insights, and research, and tidbits there, specifically about what you learned at Cisco, and you also cite some other research findings that you've been working on, and you also look at truths in there, as well, which we didn't even get a chance to look at. So, for people that are really interested in this stuff, I think the book does a great job of exploring these things, so I hope people end up grabbing it.

Ashley: Brilliant.

Jacob: Well, Ashley, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to join me today, and sharing your insights, and I hope a lot of the people listening are able to apply some of these things inside their organizations, so thank you, thank you, thank you.

Ashley: Well, and thank you for some great questions. It's been a blast.

Jacob:

Thank you very much, and thanks everyone for tuning in. My guest, again, has been Ashley Goodall, SVP of Leadership and Team Intelligence at Cisco. Make sure to check out his new book, *Nine Lies About Work: A Freethinking Leader's Guide to the Real World*, and I will see all of you next week.