

She Leads More Than 170,000 Employees In The United States: Leading With Vulnerability Has Become Her Superpower!

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You are about to listen to a conversation that I had with Alera. A brush for my brand new book leading with vulnerability. Leora is actually the chair of the board at Deloitte in the United States, which comprises over 170,000 employees. Larry is one of the over 100 CEOs that I interviewed for my book, looking at vulnerability and leadership. So I hope you enjoy this conversation with Lera. It's completely unscripted, it's candid, and you're going to hear her insights and her experiences, and some of her fascinating stories when it comes to vulnerability during her leadership career, and in present state as the chair of Deloitte in the United States. If you want to grab a copy of the book and hear more from Lera, and other CEOs that are interviewed, you can head over to lead with vulnerability.com. Again, that URL is lead with vulnerability.com. You can also head over to substack, great leadership.substack.com, enter your email there and subscribe, so you can get access to all of these episodes when we release them. So enjoy this conversation with Larry a brush.

01:15

Hey, Larry, thank you for joining me today for another conversation.

Lara Abrash 01:18

Welcome. Thanks for having me.

01:20

So let's get started jumping right into the vulnerability conversation. And I find that a lot of people think differently about vulnerability, they have very different different definitions about it. Some are personal, some are work related. When you specifically hear the phrase vulnerable leader, what are some of the words or phrases or things that come to mind for you.

Lara Abrash 01:46

Really, it's someone who's willing to open up aspects of their life, and, and their experiences, to make themselves relatable to make themselves able to connect with people in a different way to essentially advanced the conversation from tactics to something in a more emotional level.

02:10

So do you think the like the personal element is really important? So for example, would you say that you can be vulnerable leader, if nobody knows anything about your personal life, they only know about you in the work context. But you know, in the work context, you ask for help you admit mistakes when

you make them, but just nobody knows anything about you outside of work, would you say that that person would be a vulnerable leader?

Lara Abrash 02:34

I think they could be a vulnerable leader. But I think if you're really going to lead larger groups of people there, you know, you'll get an exponential return, if you really are willing to be open in broader ways, every single way you're open, allows them to realize they're not alone. So it does, it could start with you know, I've made a mistake to or I didn't ask for a raise, when maybe one time when I should have you could start with those things. Yeah. But ultimately, in this, you know, we're in this technology age, I think you and I've talked about this a bit, you know, really connecting with people is going to require more things to relate to see them to relate themselves to this is a place that could be this is a place that can be successful. So the more you can do it, which then would add the personal, I think your success levels are going to be higher. And it doesn't have to be that it's the same experience. No, it's just the fact that you're willing to share an experience.

03:30

So it's kind of like almost like going up a flight of steps, right. And the more I release, kind of that's the visual that's coming to my mind is like, start off small and the more open and vulnerability, more vulnerable, you can become the you know, the more you you progress. Does that make sense is that like kind of the it makes

Lara Abrash 03:50

sense. And quite frankly, I think you and I have talked about this, it's probably a good way for somebody who's wants to see if they can be vulnerable, it's a good way to get started is really to do something that's easier to your comfort zone. And typically talking about a work environment versus, you know, your crazy family or something like that, that's going to allow you to, to do things in a much more measured way. So I definitely agree with the steps I think the more you can do in the right environment, not every person around you does want the vulnerability. That's another thing to recognize it's not 100% but it is clearly an area that's improving and that that vulnerability does matter.

04:29

What was actually going to be my next question, because if we kind of imagine it, like the more open and vulnerable you can become, the more you'll connect with people at a certain point, like you have to have boundaries, right because to your point, you're not just gonna show up to work and, you know, cry all the time, complain all the time, talk about all your struggle, you know, like, and then people will think maybe you're some sort of a emotional mess or you don't have your life together. Like how do you balance the going up the steps, but doing so So in a way where you still have some boundaries, and people don't think that you're just like, well hanging off the rails?

Lara Abrash 05:08

Well, it's probably a couple of things. One is really reading your audience. So making sure there's moments that may be, you know, it's a topic that, quite frankly, is, it's just this asset answer. And people just want to know what's going on. And then there's, you know, inspirational leadership conversations where you're really trying to unlock potential people. So I would first start with what setting setting Am I

in, I think of the storytelling. If at the end of it, it corroborates that I've become stronger because of it, or I've learned something about myself, you can err on doing more of that. But if it all it is, is weakness and failure, and you didn't learn anything, so it's sort of reading when and how much to do? And then thinking about what did you learn out of that, and that truly allows it to not be your some weak, weak, weak, hot mess?

06:00

I think it was, I was talking to a psychologist, you know, one of the researchers on vulnerability out there. And they were telling you that, you know, vulnerable for the sake of being vulnerable, this immunity thing, you need to understand why you're doing it, is it to build relationships? Is it to, you know, connect with someone is like, why are you actually doing it? So if you just show up to work one day and say, Hey, Larry, and all this stuff is crazy in my life, and I don't know what I'm doing here. And I'm terrible. It's like, Why? Why are you sharing that. But if I'm doing it as a way to get help, or if I'm doing it as a way to learn and grow as a leader, then I might come in and say, Larry, you know, this is something I'm really struggling with, and doing my best, I would appreciate some guidance. And I'm trying to write that that is a very, very different way to be vulnerable. So maybe if we go back to that analogy of like the steps, you only kind of progress to the next step, it seems like when you you have to be kind of aware of the signs, right? It's a two way street, you have to know your audience, you have to see if they're receptive to it, if it's the right group, and only then do you take that next step. And maybe for some people, or for some audiences, you only take one or two steps, and for other audiences, you might be able to take five or six steps. So you got to have that. I don't know, self awareness, I suppose. Or, you know, reading the room, as they say.

Lara Abrash 07:22

Yeah, definitely. I mean, we often talk about in business, and in the world, the concept of IQ and EQ. This is an area where EQ is incredibly important, being vulnerable with somebody who really doesn't get energy off of it, or is going to misinterpret the purpose. And I thought that was really well said, Right? Why am I doing this? You know, if you're just doing to have someone feel sorry for you, and that's, or that's the perception that they could have is you're just trying to get out of doing something? Well, that's not a good outcome. So the EQ aspect, you know, really understanding the person you're interacting with, and their willingness to in engage in it. And then is there an objective? And that EQ is super important?

08:03

Yeah. Do you have any stories that you can share maybe of, I don't know, times when you were vulnerable, when you shouldn't have been or times when you were vulnerable, and you had a good impact? I don't know any of your experiences with vulnerability, both the good and the bad?

Lara Abrash 08:19

Well, I'll tell a couple stories, I'll tell one, for myself, and then maybe one is as a leader of leading other people. And so I would say for myself, it's probably more work related, I had taken on a role probably about eight years ago, at the firm that was very, it was an it was a mess, the place was a mess. But I went into it thinking I had this pressure on me that everybody expected me to know everything. And honestly, I probably wasn't really, truly prepared to do the role. People saw potential in me, but they

didn't necessarily see me as already now. But I for a while, let that drag out. I didn't really want to confess that I needed help. I didn't want people to think I wasn't the right selection for the role. And then probably about a month to two months into the role. I mean, I was truly struggling. I was doing a lot of things by email, because I didn't have the confidence even to exchange in a in a conversation with people. And so it was easier for me to sit in my office and rewrite and rewrite something than it was to actually be able to engage. And I finally got to a point that I said I need to essentially start with a I'm not sure I'm actually ready. I'm not sure I know everything. I went to my direct supervisor at the time, who was actually ironically in the role I'm in now. And he was the individual who put me into this role. And I said to him, I'm not really sure. Not only I'm not sure if I'm the right person for today, I'm not sure I'm the right person to actually make the changes you want to make and And he said all the things you want a leader to say, you know, I have confidence in you and I know you're the right person. But you're, you're you're right, I knew you did. And part part of why I picked you was I wanted a fresh perspective. And the way I knew I'd get that is not having somebody who had been there done that. And I started on a journey of actually talking to people about my capabilities. And then I tripped up to another issue, which was I was commanding control. I was just telling people, this is what we need to do, I got this, I did get the confidence that I could do these things. And then I realized that I was starting to irritate people that I was, I know, it's a great feeling. People, I'd go to offices, I used to joke, you know, you'd walk down the hall, and all of a sudden, you'd look up, they all somehow disappeared, running into offices, but I was like, so pushy. And so results driven, I started to realize that while I was getting, you know, very short term, your things done that probably made my boss happy. I wasn't thinking about the human element. And I went on a real reflection journey around getting feedback about how do you influence people rather tell them what to do? And how do you take more time to engage, it's back to that EQ topic that we talked about. So I spent a lot of time with people. And it started with telling them that I probably wasn't doing my job well, and letting them have the space to acknowledge that. So that was probably for me at the time. You know, a very vulnerable story that I told,

11:38

I love that, um, can we go maybe in a little bit more detail? So what was the role that I don't know, if you're able to share? Like, what was the role that you were in?

Lara Abrash 11:48

I was running operations for our audit business. So we had been not doing particularly well, from a financial perspective, when I was put in, we have missed our plans, we were shrinking. And so there was a lot of work that needed to be done, I had never had a role, even at a lower level, to do something like this. And the people that whose behaviors we were, you know, trying to change, this wasn't their only focus, they, you know, they're people, they run our regions, they're, they're taking care of our people, they're serving our clients, they're growing the business. One aspect of what they did is was the area of finance and operations. But I needed I felt this immense pressure to regain credibility for, you know, we could develop a plan and meet it, we could grow. And I was really pushing way, way too hard, too fast.

12:39

Okay, so you're, I guess the the person who has or who had your role the CEO of this division, put you in this position to run it seems like the operations piece. And so were you already an executive at the time? Or was this like a really big jump for you from your previous position?

Lara Abrash 12:58

This was a really big jump for me. Okay. I'd say that. I think prior to that, I was, you know, running it, like the New Jersey practice, which is a, you know, it's like 5% of our business. It's not a particularly large operation. And so yes, it was a very large job. Oh, and I should also mention the CEO. At the time, this was his second time being the CEO, he had been it, he went off and did something else and came back. And if, you know, I won't say his name. But if people who listened more probably know, I'm talking about, he knew everything about everything. So part of the challenge was also coming in, and not only making it such a big job, but working for somebody who could probably have done any of the jobs on our executive team better than we can do it. And that was, that was challenging, too.

13:42

Yeah. Okay, so you get put into this role. And you go in there thinking like, okay, all I need is a plan. I just need the strategy. I can get everything working, I can get everything profitable, I can fix all the issues. And so So where were the roadblocks, so you know, you get into this position, and you know, you come up with a plan and the strategy why? What were the challenges? What is it that you didn't know how to do that you were struggling with?

Lara Abrash 14:07

Well, I would say one thing was really being able to gauge reactions from the team members. So was I pushing too hard or not enough? I pushed so hard that some people essentially just gave up on me. And they were sending me signals like, No, we're not going to grow by 20% next year. And I just kept pushing, because I thought that was the right answer. And you know, what, we didn't grow by 20%. They knew better than me. So it was that ability to really understand the pushback from the team, influencing them, like why were we doing the things that I wanted us to do? I was coming in like a nail and a hammer as opposed to really thinking about for them personally, why we're, you know, what we're doing and I really at some point, realized that my the way I could be the most effective was making them successful. versus me tell Lean them what to do. And so I started to spend a lot more time listening to individuals to say, what do you need to be successful, and I started to really change my behavior. But that took a few months. And they took a lot of vulnerability that actually, they said, We don't like your emails, they're too long. And they don't make a lot of sense. And I was like, okay, so you want to talk by phone. So really engaging and understanding what I was doing or not doing well. And but at the same time doing my job, right, it does, you can get all the feedback you want. And you can be vulnerable and open about what you think you need to do differently. But at the end of the day, you also have to do your jobs. So finding that balance was probably the one of the harder things for me.

15:39

Okay. All right. So you're so you're a couple of months in there, you're trying to make change, you're trying to create the strategy, you have these crazy goals, and you're finding that you're not, you're not meeting these goals, you're not seeing the change and the transformation that you want. So it sounds like a couple months in the first thing that you do is you go to your the former CEO. And what do you

remember what you told him? Like you booked a meeting with him? Did you guys go out to lunch, and you're like, I just, it's not for me.

Lara Abrash 16:05

I went into his office. And I first figured before I can see that it was in an office before I just fell on my sword. About Me personally, I gave it a go and basically said, I've been doing this for four months, I'm really struggling, you know, I even said, some of the people in the team weren't doing their job, I wasn't willing to take responsibility initially for me, and I said, they don't really know what they're doing. And he sees he's such an experienced guy, he just like, we're all gonna learn something here. And then I finally said, I'm not sure. I actually know what I need to do. And which

16:39

is a very vulnerable thing to say, right? I mean, I don't know if I should be in this position. Yeah. And I'm curious what the response was.

Lara Abrash 16:48

Yeah. So when I said that to him. And to be clear, I said, not only do I know, not know, if I'm in the right person, today, I'm also not charging the right person to do what you want out of this, this role. I mean, I'm just struggling to even do what I'll refer to as big business as usual, versus even evolving, which I think was his, his vision. And he, he smiled, he was this very, you know, nearing retirement partner had been there, done that he, and he had this very infectious smile. And I known him really well. And he said to me, Lara, I didn't bring you into this role, because you had it all figured out. You know, I have a lot of confidence in you as a leader. I know your results driven, I knew you'd be a quick study, but I didn't think you were going to do everything. And then we pivoted into, but how are you addressing what you don't know, as opposed to spending all this time on, you know, my, my falling on my sword about my concern that I wasn't the right person, he really pivoted into making it more actionable for me,

17:54

I suppose. I mean, did you have a fear that when you went in there, he could have just said, alright, well pack your stuff? And or go back to your previous role? Like, did you have a fear that he would just, you know, get out of the company?

Lara Abrash 18:06

Yes, I was afraid I'm not I. I was afraid that being so overt, that he would say, Well, maybe, you know, we there was a really good person whose place I took, that individual had been in the role for a long time. And I think, in my mind, I was thinking he could just go back easily that person hadn't left the company. He may not have thought that was the right person for the changes that needed to be made. But he clearly was running the ship fine. So I went in in thinking, well, maybe he'll just go and ask him to come in. But honestly, I had gotten to a point I was losing sleep, I wasn't feeling good about myself. And I said, if I'm not honest with somebody about, you know, whether I can be successful or not, it's, it's gonna it's gonna blow up on me. So it sort of felt like if I didn't do something soon, it was gonna blow up one way or the other. And maybe I still wouldn't have my job, but it would, it wouldn't be on my own terms.

19:02

Yeah, no, I love that story. I mean, it seems like he was a great leader to kind of, you know, take your vulnerability to understand it. And then what was the what was the path and you guys took afterwards? So he it sounds like he said, Well, what are you going to do to fix the things that you don't know? And it sounds like part of what you did is you listen to a lot of people you want to talk to them and and they give you feedback, like we don't like your emails, you're too pushy. It sounds like your command and control approach shifted more towards putting your people first asking them what kind of leader they want you to be like being a much more, I guess human is the right word.

Lara Abrash 19:40

Yeah, that's exactly right. I would say one of the things we did was he agreed to get me an external coach. So you know, somebody who I could talk to, you know, to form strategies around. How do I open myself up for a conversation and may not like what I When I'm going to hear, and if someone says something I don't want to hear, do I get defensive? Or do I just listen? It was a lot of coaching on how do you go in, have those conversations he this coach also went into the 360. For me. So for some people, it gave them an opportunity before I got there to even say, to maybe even put their thoughts together. And it was interesting was everybody that the coach spoke to and I spoke to actually aligned with my objectives, like what I was trying to do with the role. It was really about how I was approaching them and how I was influencing behavior. So for me, it really became how do I influence how do I make this the what's in it for me and helping them be successful and helping them show that what they were doing was heading them in the right direction was, was a real change?

20:49

Yeah, I love that. And I mean, it sounds like what happened? I mean, now you became the CEO. So

Jacob Morgan 20:57

it sounds like had you not been vulnerable, you probably wouldn't be in the position that you're in now. So vulnerability for you actually became a huge strength, a huge kind of like boost the big power up that really propelled you in your career and allowed you to become more successful? Because, I mean, what what would have happened, if you would have never gotten to the CEO and said that,

21:18

you know, do you? Do you know what the potential other outcome was? Would you have just gotten fired? You think,

Lara Abrash 21:26

oh, if I would have gotten fired, but I wouldn't be sitting here, I wouldn't have learned a really important lesson. The compassion and human elements of me, I've always been there. But you know, a learning for people is when you know, it's sort of like that saying, When do you talk about politics and religion, you don't talk about it at work those things. Like I've, since college, I've always been referred to as the mom. I'm the mom of every group of friends of men or situations, I'm inside, you know, at delete, I was definitely always a mom. But I took this role on. And I thought, Well, I'm a big important leader. Now, I can't be the mom. But ultimately, that compassion and ability to connect actually became more powerful than anything. And probably the thing I'm the proudest of, is about five years after that whole

situation took place, I did another 360. And someone referred to me as Lera 2.0. And it was an acknowledgment of a change in leading versus managing, connecting versus driving, influencing, and compassion. And that's something I've really leveraged since then. But it made me feel good, because I could still get the results, but I'm doing it in a way that is, makes everybody feel good.

22:45

Yeah, I love it. Lera 2.0. And so now is this concept of vulnerability or being a vulnerable leader. So just part of your day to day? Is it just like, who you are now? And does it manifest in like little small ways on a regular basis?

Lara Abrash 23:00

Definitely, as part of my day to day, if I'm totally honest, I have to make sure I turn it off. It's back to that, you know, eq iq thing. So you don't want to overplay any strength you have, and you don't want to read the you know, not read the audience. So for me, it is natural. We just had a call this morning with all of our professionals, and I wore my Mets zip up jersey, because today's opening day, and everybody knows I'm a Mets fan. And for those that are sports fans, it's it's an immediate connection to something that gives them so much energy. But I probably have to be more thoughtful about turning things off, but it is every single day. It's part of who I am.

23:44

Yeah. Now, that's an important lesson, right? Being being aware. Do you find that? So when you say turning it off, have you had experiences of situations where you were vulnerable? And you just kind of got a feeling that those around you were like, not responding well to that? Or what why do you think you need to turn it off? In some instances?

Lara Abrash 24:04

Well, not everybody is the same makeup. So I remember having an individual who worked for me, and my style would generally be friendly mom, like, you know, work hard, but play hard, you know, you know, really good communication. If someone wasn't gonna get something done that they would let me know. And that's because that's who I am. Right? And so it was like, I expected this from everybody around me. And I remember having someone who worked for me and I was really struggling with him and he's an introvert. He you know, he just wants to do his job and go home. You know, he's not looking to be friends with anybody.

24:44

That sounds exactly like my dad.

Lara Abrash 24:47

You probably don't do that that your EQ until you probably you know, you should you should back off. And you also as we said earlier, I've had situations where, you know, I've had some things in my life personal things go on health issues. Is that I said, Is this really in this particular instance? Getting get somebody evolving? Or are they going to think, Oh, she's just trying to get me to feel sorry for her? So I've definitely said, What is the objective? And is this the right place to do it? But once you do it, this is another thing for you and your, you know, the people who listen and read your book. You can't put that,

that genie back in the bottle. You know, it's hard for people around you to then say, well, why is this person so closed up? That's why it's important to pick when and how you do it. Because once you start to do a lot, it'll seem very odd to people when you're not doing it at all. And a lot of people really do like it.

25:42

Yeah. So I guess in the instance of this, this employee, you said an introvert, you know, didn't want to be friends with anybody. So what what kind of happened there, were you you said, you were trying to be friendly, and did you find that he was just totally put off by it not not not having any of the friendliness,

Lara Abrash 25:59

who by my tactics weren't working, I mean, I had this way of using my friendly, encouraging side to, to get a lot of things done, and to push people really hard and, you know, create an environment where I liked, I was a big, I was a big, you're gonna live another Lera thing that's gonna come I love communication, it's a really important part to me of working in an environment, I believe over communicating is better. So they used to refer to that when I'd come out, they'd have to do something called Alera list, which was a, you know, a basically a alternative to the fact that they hadn't been doing the great communication, but they knew I was going to want this. And I realized this individual was just he wasn't his introvert ways. He wasn't going to wake up thinking, I've got to over communicate, he was going to provide the bare minimum, because it was taking all of the energy, he had to just do it easy to do. So I evolved, I realized that it was going to be my job to you know, rather than trying to have him fit into my which, by the way, it's incredibly important in an inclusive environment. This is not about assimilation, and getting people to all be like you, it's about trying to evolve and create space. So it was learning with him with him. What was the best ways for him to communicate? And if I could inform or influence it as an example? I would, I didn't, you know, I didn't force him to do happy hours. I mean, it was really finding things that mattered to him. And what I found out was, he actually liked doing some social things, maybe necessarily want to do a happy hour, you know, those things weren't of interest to him, he would like to go to a museum instead, or go see a show. So start to figure out like, what worked for him. And that was another evolution for me is not every not everybody is like you. And yeah, so when you will use vulnerability, it can't be the drive their behaviors, it's just to create an environment.

27:54

I love that I love that story. And yeah, that very much makes me think of my dad, because sometimes I talk to my dad about this stuff. And he's like, Why the hell do I want to know anything about the people? You know, he's like, old school Russian guy, right? And just not having an Why do I need to be friends with the people that I work with? Why do they need to know anything about me? I'm like, Dad, do you care about connecting with your your co workers? No, I'm just there. And I'm like, alright, well, you know, I Yeah. And that's how I think some people are right. And I think in those situations, like you said, you can't force it, you can't like force connection, you can't force people to open up, you can't force people to like, You, you, right, you can't like make these things happen. But like you said, you can evolve and you can better understand your people and what they care about and value and meet them on their terms, instead of you forcing them to kind of come to your terms, which seems like a very, very important lesson that you learned.

Lara Abrash 28:51

Yeah, and I think that influence comment from earlier is important. It's, it's the what's in it, for me, coming out of this pandemic, you know, we've had so many people work from home, we're trying to get some of these individuals to come back in not 100% of the time, but we you know, to have zero human connection is just not healthy. But again, you know, we have a lot of people that have enjoyed not coming in, and they don't see the value of doing it. So we're trying to, like evolve their thinking as opposed to just, you know, force their hand because, you know, they're great employees are highly productive. But on the long term in a, you know, I'm not sure all of it, it'll be like the movie, Wally, if all of us just did this from our houses.

29:34

Let's hope not. I remember that show, right. At some point, people weren't even walking. They just had these motorized carts and like the food was just flying into their face. Slurpees I love that cartoon. Now, you make a great point. And I think there's still a lot of value to the in person. Connection. And, yeah,

Jacob Morgan 29:53

I mean, we live in a hybrid world, but I think people sometimes assume that it's a remote world, and it's not shouldn't be a remote world. should be a hybrid world and there's still value to the in person stuff. It's kind of like, you know, would you only want to have friends remotely? No. I mean, you still go out with friends, you go grab coffee with them, ensure you talk to them on the phone, you FaceTime, but you also have some of the in person stuff too. And I, I very much think of work in the same right? Yeah, you can you can talk on Zoom or whatever platform you're using. But hey, you know what, sometimes you're gonna get together and go out for lunch and grab coffee and brainstorm ideas.

Lara Abrash 30:29

Yeah, exactly. So have you. And I think we

30:33

kind of touched on this when it comes to vulnerability, you've never really had or at least that you're aware of somebody, use it against you as a way to to hurt you or bring you down? No. Which is good. Yes. One of the big challenges that I find with people, and you've alluded to this earlier, and it's this idea of how can you be vulnerable without being perceived as weak. And it sounds like the way that you've been able to figure that out, is you're still good at your job. So you're vulnerable, but you're still good at your job, you're still producing good quality work. And

Jacob Morgan 31:12

it sounds like you focus on kind of the learning moments or the why, right, so you're not being vulnerable, just for the sake of it, you're still being good at your job, and you're genuinely trying to improve or to learn or to grow.

Lara Abrash 31:26

That's totally right. And for the role I'm in, a lot of it is about creating a culture of vulnerability, so that others have the the the ability to do that. And so I really think about it as a relatability. If I'm willing to

share things about me that create an awareness to somebody, I'm going through the same thing, or to teach to have a really strong teaching moment. And storytelling is probably the number one way to create people's interest in in where something is going right is telling a story that brings it to life. And if you tell a vulnerable story that curates in an inspirational way something that they may want to do, either they be vulnerable, or do something I tell a story about my son, and his, his formative years. And the challenges that he had. And I talked about that relative to my own passion for inclusion. And part of it is I tell people that I probably I failed, I've actually told our a lot of our people that I failed relative to diversity, equity inclusion, and that it took the situation for my son to to occur. And it's an incredibly vulnerable story. But I tell it so that they understand how important it is for somebody to feel included, because they may not have if you look like everybody else around you, and you went to the same colleges as everybody and you know, you have things given to you you're gonna you may not feel like the people in the room that don't look like you. And it's for those people to create an understanding of what it must feel like to have that moment in your life. And for me, it was a it was a big moment.

33:10

Can you share that story? I think we talked about it a little bit last time. But if you're comfortable with it, and you're okay with sharing,

Lara Abrash 33:15

I'm happy to share it. So my son who now is 18 Crazy going to college next year, when he was five, he was struggling in his preschool. I would say more in how he was interacting with the other students. And we got a call from the preschool teacher asking if we would come in my husband and I and they started describing these behaviors that he was exhibiting in the preschool, which seemed completely normal to me. Because they were things that I thought all four and five year olds did. I mean, I don't think they act like 10 or 12 year olds, but they actually seemed troubling. So they suggested we go to a pediatric neurologist. And they did an assessment of him and said they saw some evidence that he had some social drawbacks, and you know, he could be on the spectrum. And they started suggesting things we could do for him to help his school experience be better. So he was classified and he was, you know, he sat in the in the front of the class, he was given extra time for tests. He was pulled out for almost everything single thing you can get pulled out for he really struggled with sports. And during that period of time, he was bullied by these kids. You know, the fourth fifth graders would they were relentless to him. And the teachers loved him. And then when we went into the middle school, we took him out we actually saw enough social improvement. Then he got diagnosed with epilepsy. And all the same things happen again, where he had to sit in the front row of the bus. God forbid he had a seizure he was allowed to do after school activities because there wasn't a nurse there. And just all these things that kept him separate from his peers. And the kids made fun of them and the teachers as you know, loved him because he was unique and fun. And then he asked to go to a different high school, it was his asking of us. And we sent them to one which audit surface seemed like it would provide a much better environment. They had round tables versus seats, the kids talk to each other versus just a teacher talking to them. And about a month after he started that school, his sister, my daughter went up to him in the kitchen, I overheard them and she said, Nicholas, you know, how school going. And he said, it's wonderful, I finally found the place I fit in. And it was at that moment that I realized that, you know, making people assimilate into environments is not what we should want. We want to make people feel included. And I started reflecting on my own life. And did I at all times make people feel that

way. And that's what I really have been trying to bring to the to work every single day. And I tell that story with a lot more detail. I tell that story so that people understand the raw emotions of somebody who really feels alienated.

36:00

Yeah, no, and that's a fantastic story. And so so it sounds like you share that very personal story with your, your peers, your leaders, your co workers. And you know, when you find that you open up and share about yourself, what's what's the reaction that you get, like when you share something like that with with your team?

Lara Abrash 36:16

Yeah, well, one amazed that someone's sharing something so personal about their life, I get a lot of notes from people who either themselves have experienced a similar situation, I have people in the firm who are or who are on the spectrum, and feel like they, you know that this is something that they can relate to. And then I would just say, well, I refer to as vulnerable people, people that don't meet the criteria of what everybody else expects. And they come out and say, Thank God, a leader is finally talking about this and acknowledging it. And it resonates with the people that aren't vulnerable and different, because they start to realize, you know, if you're a parent I in the story, I talked about how my son would come home, and I found out he had a crying spot. And that was the place he would go. And then the school told me, Well, it's okay, if he's crying, because that means you didn't cry at school, it was a good day. And no mom wants to hear that. And I tell that story. And for any parent, they can relate to that. So it's, it comes a lot of different ways of feedback. But it definitely starts with I can't believe a CEO of the firm is willing to share this much. And I've actually asked my son, if it's okay for me to share the story. Because he was getting old enough. I didn't want him to put up a podcast like this and say, Well, I can't believe he told the story. And I explained to him, the objective is not just to talk about you, the objective is to help others.

37:45

Yeah, yeah. And again, I, it does come back again, to that point of the objective of why you're sharing it not just sharing it for the sake of sharing it, which I think is really important. Is there anything that you do to practice self awareness? Because it seems like one of the things that you're pretty good at is you're aware of? Who like what to share with who you know who's in the room? Like, it seems like you're pretty good at reading the room? And it's probably something you've learned over the years. But how do you practice that level of self awareness to understand like, what you're good at what you're not good at what you should share what you shouldn't share? How to Talk to people like we're How do you practice as the coach that you're still working with? Or it's just natural at this point?

Lara Abrash 38:26

Well, I do a couple things. One, and I've talked about this, I think with you or others, like a lot of executives, evaluate the strength of their culture through like KPIs. I'm a big believer in sentiment, and part of sentiment, whether it's quantitative or qualitative is really understanding the hearts and minds. So if I'm on a call with 15,000 people, before that call, I spent a fair amount of time trying to understand what are they coming to that call with? What are they expecting? You know, in the early days of the pandemic, they they just wanted to know that they weren't alone, you know, they're in their mid 20s.

They're not alone. This is scary. Are we gonna get better? Now? It's, when are things gonna get normal? And so I really spend a lot of time on that. I have several people I go to, to test things out, if I feel like I'm not sure. I'm going, Is this really going too far? I may say is this, you know, Is this really necessary? Sometimes I go with my gut, you know, in the midst of a moment, I may, I may get a sense. The nice thing about in person is I can actually feel the energy of the room and feel the the willingness to push the you know, for most to push the envelope that's harder and zoom, will actually use people to test that.

39:43

Yeah, I was gonna say, what's an example of something that you would test out? And can you talk a little bit more about who this group is? Is this like your personal advisor network that you have at work or to talk a little bit more about the group and what you share with them and how you test things out?

Lara Abrash 39:58

So I had a telling you the story. But I had a health issue over the last several months. And I felt that this was something that given my history of sharing so much with the business, I felt like I should potentially share. And I went to a few people, the early reactions, and these would be, I would say, advisors, people who see me and see our business from different angles. And I, the early reaction was, of course, you should say something. But then as I played it out, you know, maybe, you know, three or four days later, and I think I ended up talking to seven or eight people. The reality was, you know, What's the objective. And, you know, I decided on the calls I had today that I could talk about the focus on wellbeing and mental health without getting into a gory story about me, I alluded to it by saying, so many of us in our friends have health issues, whether they be physical or mental health, particularly with these ongoing, you know, we have another war going on. And it was a real big plug to take care of yourselves to go for the annual appointments, which is how I identify my issue, but I decided that it didn't, it wasn't necessary for me to get so explicit to get that message across. But that really came out of talking to seven or eight people. And then I started thinking it could create more of a distraction from the message than what I was really trying to get for it. And that but it took a little bit of time, and it took a lot of voices and I do on things that really matter. I do use that group to give me input.

41:29

And how did you develop that group? Is it a, you know, random employees, people that you've known for a long time? Is it like all inside your company or outside? Can you talk a little bit about how that group formed, and is it like a very specific set of seven or eight people that you keep going back to with stuff like this,

Lara Abrash 41:47

it's pretty specific. I mean, my husband is one of them. So he's definitely outside of the company, but he knows me about as well as anybody. And there's probably a group of three to five to six partners that have known me some for just a couple years, some for maybe 20 years, some have seen the evolution of me, but what's really critical is that they not only know me, they also have a hand on the pulse. So if you're gonna go into an environment that may not be conducive to over overstimulation, you know, maybe somebody just wants to know what a raise is going to be next year. Like you coming in and telling a sappy story about, you know, your weekend and you're taught, you know, you had a flat tire,

those things are not what they want. So, you know, talking to them and saying, like, what's on the hearts and minds in addition to myself doing it? So it'd be a group of people I know, what's really been important, is they're not yes, people. And they also that they have a different way of looking at things. Because I'm not talking to six or seven people who have the same lens. There's a contrarian in the group. There's a person who's probably more like me in the group relative to, you know, be more open versus less, there's somebody who's, I probably wouldn't know whether they're married or not, if they didn't tell me and they may not want to tell me. I mean, I tried. And that wasn't intentional. It's just I've now realized I've got a nice group of people. And I test things out with them. Before it, particularly in high stakes thing. I don't test everything. But this was a great example of a higher stake topic.

43:17

I love that. So you kind of have your own like peer advisory network. And are they all your peers, like all at your executive level, some below some above?

Lara Abrash 43:29

It's, it's all over some above some at my level, and then some below, if I really think I need I'll say a wider net, I have some younger people I like I'll say much younger, like, you know, the people who are going to probably within five to 10 years of me, I can go to 20 or 30 years, and I have a couple of people that I think again, would provide good input if needed.

43:50

Okay, I love that you have that network? And do they know they're part of a network? Like, did you go to them and say, hey, you know, I want to have a little bit of like a peer network of people who I can run ideas off of, are you okay with being one of those people? Or do they not even know that they're part of like this group, and you just go to them individually and talk to them? Um,

Lara Abrash 44:09

I definitely have said to all of them, at some point, I value your input, and I'm going to test things out on you from time to time. Sometimes I go to all of them, sometimes I may go to two or three, again, depending on what the topic is. I think they know that they're a valued voice to me. And if I asked something, they did it again, they don't rush your response. They really they understand the seriousness of I'm asking them a question. I really want their thoughtful and honest feedback. Yeah.

44:36

Okay. Well, that's great. I think earlier on when we were talking you were saying that, Oh, there's two stories I want to share one is personal. Do we not even get to the second one?

Lara Abrash 44:44

Well, the second one was about my son because that's, that's more about how I lead and tell stories to people about, you know, to create. One was my own vulnerability at doing my job and that was a personal story.

44:55

Got it. Anything else about self awareness? Kind of I took you off on a tangent with some of my questions. Is there anything else you want to?

Lara Abrash 45:05

Definitely the I would say not to overplay vulnerability, that's a really, we we touched on this, I want to make sure as you think about it, it is this bat finding this balance and this sweet spot is really, really, really important and and testing out, did I reach it? You know, not just assuming that success is you shared something, successes is did the objective get met? Do people look at you as somebody that they have confidence in? And so being very vocal focused on feedback, being open to evolving, asking people, you know, when I even saying when I shared that story, did I overstep my bounds? Right, it's, it's okay, now, maybe it's not everybody to do that. But my biggest worry is, we get to a point that it's, it's, it's too much. And it creates a level of people being, you know, more uncomfortable than comfortable. It has a real, it's, it's intentional, but not to a point that it detracts from what you're trying to do.

46:08

And how do you know, if it's meeting the desired objective? You know, you bring up a great point, like, do you, you know, you can't share something with somebody. And then right afterwards, you're like, hey, I don't want to share with you create connection with us, or, like, you know, how do you know that you did the right thing, and it's moving in the direction that you should that you want it to be moving in?

Lara Abrash 46:26

Well, that EQ is really important. So if I'm sharing something, I'm not just telling the story. I'm watching physical cues. I'm watching verbal cues, I'm watching level of interest, are they looking away? And that starts to tell me, are they getting energy out of this? Or are they in the back of their mind wondering why is this person telling this to me? So in a lot of one on one or small settings, I am incredibly focused on queues Now, not every there's a lot of people who has also have really good filters. Some of us have sat there zoom calls, and you would, you wouldn't know what we're thinking. So if I can't get that out of a physical queue, I may have people talk to them. I may have people talk to people that they're close to they say, Hey, I know you just met with Lera. How'd the conversation go? You know, what did you think? And again, without leading the horse to water, there's, if they say, Oh, God, she showed up and started telling crazy stories, well, then you realize that, you know, you pushed it too far. And when it's with a larger group, like our you know, our all hands calls that I have, you know, I have people go out and put out film, you know, feelers and I do recognize that across 15,000 people, not everybody's going to love everything. And that's probably also something I've had to evolve to the say, you can't be everything to everyone. So there's just extensive if I hit the masses, that's that's a good outcome.

47:52

Yeah. Would you say that you practice self compassion?

Lara Abrash 47:58

Yes, I think so.

48:00

Like, being kind to yourself. And I feel like that's important. Or I was told that's an important aspect of vulnerability to

Lara Abrash 48:09

one sharing these stories. opens you up. Yeah. And it opens you up to, again, back to the point that everybody wants it. And it also opens you up potentially, to criticism, although I, at least to my face, haven't had it come in. And so it takes a lot of energy to be vulnerable. It's much easier to turn, do asked and answered. So I, I would say unkind to myself that I realized it's exhausting. And if I can't do it for six hours a day, I sort of recognize like this, this may be one of the sessions, you're in your second and get that. Yeah, I I would say I'm also critical of myself. So I both have self compassion. But I also you know, I still want to make sure I'm always doing better. So I spent a lot of time trying to just get feedback again, without over if you're always asking for feedback back to your point of Is it too much people are gonna say they're, they're unsure with themselves. So it's this constant with me of making sure I'm striking that right balance. Bs, I mean, I, I'm deferential so I want self compassion to me is a good topic. But I I'm also differential I don't want to take all the credit because of all the great things I say. So there's, you have to find a balance.

49:27

Alright, and maybe last question for you not specifically related to vulnerability, but it is a leadership hack, a tip or a strategy that you have used during the course of your career that you think has made you more successful.

Lara Abrash 49:43

Connecting with people, you know, the probably the number one thing for me is over a 3040 50 year time in the workplace or over the life of somebody. The ability to connect is a true differentiator. And that could mean more really knowing how to bring energy out of people, how to inspire them, how to give them drive, how they know you have their back, and really do it in the most human way. There's so many great executives that have probably better intuition about problem solving and strategy. But if you can't connect with people, and motivate them and have them thrive, you know, you're not going to achieve anything. So that's probably for me, Ben, something came out of being, I'm the youngest of four. And I've spent my whole life probably, you know, being told my brothers, this, this or this, and a, I'm a pleaser. And that meant that I really wanted to make sure I connected with people and created the best times for everybody

50:47

and love it. Well, Lera thank you so much for taking time out of your day. I really appreciate it. Fantastic stories, and I'm so excited to share this with everyone. So again, thank you.

Lara Abrash 50:57

Thank you so much, Jacob. Take care. Bye