

Federal Judicial Council
Interview with Jerry Colonna
Executive Edge Podcast Episode 16:
Radical Self-Inquiry for Leaders

Lori Murphy: Coming up on *Executive Edge*.

Jerry Colonna: What am I not saying that needs to be said? What's being said that I'm not hearing? And what am I saying that's not being heard? If leaders can organize themselves around questions like that, what ends up happening is they lead from a place of deep and profound humanity that creates trust, and community, and compassion, and collaboration and our ability to face impossible challenges.

Lori Murphy: In today's episode we'll discuss the idea that to become better leaders, we first need to become better human beings. Our guest argues that learning to lead yourself is the hardest part of becoming a leader. It is only possible through what he describes as radical self-inquiry. Today's episode is all about learning how to look within ourselves to be able to lead others effectively so we can create the organizations that we and our employees want to work for.

We're talking today with Jerry Colonna, author of *Reboot: Leadership and the Art of Growing Up*. Jerry is a venture capitalist turned executive coach and CEO and co-founder of Reboot.io - an executive coaching and leadership development firm. For nearly 20 years Jerry has drawn on his expertise as

an investor, executive, and board member at more than a hundred organizations to help others find and lead with humanity, resilience, and equanimity.

Our host for today's episode is Michael Siegel, senior education specialist for Executive Education at the Federal Judicial Center. Michael, take it away.

Michael Siegel: Thanks, Lori. Jerry, thanks so much for joining us.

Jerry Colonna: Thanks for having me, Michael. It's really a pleasure to be with you all.

Michael Siegel: Thank you. Toward the end of your book you say: So much of what I've learned about growing up comes from learning to lead. Can you explain this really provocative statement?

Jerry Colonna: Sure. I think that the best way to understand what I'm trying to assert here is to look at the process of leading as the process of completing our human development. When I started to think about what did I believe to be true about leadership, I came to understand that simple equation - that better humans make better leaders. Okay. That's easy to understand. Then the more interesting question arose which was, well, then why do we have such difficult or such poor leadership? And I realize that we have such poor leadership, is because we're not using the experience of leading

to work on ourselves. We're spending 10, 12, 15, 16 hours a day in positions of authority in the agency and we're just dragging all of our unfinished business into those positions and not necessarily working on it.

So I appreciate you call it provocative. For me, it's a challenge. Can you actually use the process of leading to finish the process of growing up?

Michael Siegel: A really interesting perspective. Let me push that a little bit. In becoming a leader and becoming a fuller expression of ourselves, is this the same thing as being authentic?

Jerry Colonna: Well, being authentic is an expression of being our full selves. Right? Brené Brown has done a fantastic job of elevating the notion of vulnerability. I actually choose though not to use those words, authenticity and vulnerability. I'm from Brooklyn, I get really simple. How about we show up and be real? I think that that's what this is all about. This is about being real. It's about, therefore, being trustworthy. It's about, therefore, showing up into the fullness of yourself including the parts of ourselves that we are not always proud of.

But instead of hiding those and covering those with aggression and shame or instead - in worse cases - producing toxic cultures around us, if a leader, someone who has authority

and power can acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses and lean into those and say I'm going to use this process to work on my processes, then what ends up happening is we have a much, much more healthy organization and structure in society. Political structures. Everything starts to flow in a healthier way.

Michael Siegel: I can relate to the directness because I'm from New Jersey. So we're on the same page. You come to an expression and you just kind of intimated this. The expression is radical self-inquiry.

Jerry Colonna: Right.

Michael Siegel: Can you elaborate on this a little bit?

Jerry Colonna: I use this as a term to describe what I call the process by which the masks that we wear to protect us are compassionately and skillfully stripped away so that we have no place to hide anymore. Now what I just said is loaded and powerful because it's really important to hold that process with skill and grace and compassion. We develop masks. We learn to hide our true selves as a way to protect ourselves mostly from shame but oftentimes from existential violence in some form or another.

We do this through the process of asking ourselves powerful questions. Like: Who am I as an adult? What do I value about the world? Do I believe the world is a dog-eat-dog, get them

before they get me kind of world? If so, how does that inform my leadership and my adulthood? I call this entire thing radical because we tend not to do it. It's radical because it's essential to the process of actually growing up and becoming our fuller selves. We tend not to do it because it's painful and it's scary.

Michael Siegel: Indeed. You also say that standing still can help one do this radical self-inquiry. How does that work?

Jerry Colonna: Well, standing still is a shorthand term I came to. Most poetically, most powerfully it comes from a beautiful poem by David Wagoner called *Lost*. The first line of which is: When you're lost in the woods, stand still.

Now I do a lot of public speaking. I do a lot of engagements with people. One of the first things I ask people is how are you doing, and then I joke. No. Really how are you? One of the things that often emerges is people feel lost. They feel exhausted. They feel overwhelmed.

When we feel lost, the thing to do is to stop moving, is to stop the process. There's that old line: When you find yourself at the bottom of a hole, stop digging. Right? Stand still because it's not working. Then pause and ask yourself a series of questions. Am I leading the way I want to lead? Is this the organization that I want it to be? Is this the company that I would like to work for? Is this the life that I'd like to lead?

Michael Siegel: So, Jerry, how can leaders find the time to stand still literally? Where do they find that kind of time?

Jerry Colonna: Well, you know, the truth is that all of us feel busy all the time. But behind that question, Michael, is what I think really is a bit of a myth. It's anxiety masked in the sense of overwhelmed. It kind of goes like this: I don't have time to think. I don't have time to breathe. I don't have time to fill in the blank because everything is so urgent all the time.

So let's just pause and think about that for a moment. What are we dealing in our organizations that we're asking people who have power and agency to live like that? What kind of decisions are they making when they're living at the edge of their ability to breathe? Is it really true that I have to work at that pace or is there something else going on there? In my book I used the phrase that we often mistake motion for meaning and that we create a sense that busyness is somehow a sense of value affirmation and validation. Ah, I'm so busy.

Now I don't want to be dismissive. There's a lot of work to be done, but really do you not have time to pause in the morning to sip your coffee and do one thing at a time? Just have a cup of coffee and pause for two or three minutes before you plunge in and start staring at a screen again. Give your mind the chance to catch up. So I'm not saying that it's not

true that people are busy. It's just we often use busyness as a mask for something else.

Michael Siegel: I tend to agree. I think of the old Covey distinction between urgency and importance.

Jerry Colonna: That's it. That's it.

Michael Siegel: We're in a time and era of COVID-19 where people do things like deplete themselves, run themselves into the ground. Which are questions you have posed to executives: Why have I depleted myself? Why have I run myself into the ground? Why have I let myself become so exhausted?

What kind of answers do executives give to you? What does the current environment do to either exacerbate or deal with that issue?

Jerry Colonna: I'm going to answer this question with a short story that I tell in the book. There's an old story about an ancient potter who spends his entire life trying to perfect the most exquisite glaze imaginable. At the end of his life, deciding that his meaningful life is over, he walks into the kiln and disappears into the fire. The next day the potter's assistants open up the kiln and take out the pots. They're covered with - what? The most exquisite glaze imaginable.

It's a really problematic story because, one lesson, the story seems to be that the way to create the thing that we're all desiring - this exquisite glaze - is to deplete ourselves

entirely and to disappear into the work. And we get that message a lot.

When I think about that story, I ask myself: Where is the potter's spouse? Where are the potter's kids? Did they have any choice in this matter? The answer of course is nobody asked them. So I use that story to then turn to a leader and ask them the really important question here: Are you working 20 hours a day because it's necessary or because you're afraid of facing what is going on outside of work?

Now you ask specifically about COVID and life in pandemic lockdown. Part of what's going on is that our world feels like a dumpster fire. It's dumpster fire after dumpster fire after dumpster fire. We are scared collectively. For some people, we feel like we're fending on our own. For some, they take comfort and validation from staring into a computer screen all day long because at least it feels like it's something I can control in a world that increasingly feels out of control.

But I have learned that using a distraction does not create a sense of well-being. As you know from my book, the goal is equanimity. The world is a dumpster fire and I'm okay. The world is beautiful and I'm okay. And so what the calling in a time like this is to reach back, is to stand still, and to go back and say what's actually important. What matters? You

know, I know I'm speaking to the federal judiciary here. I'm going to make a comment, thank God for the work you guys do.

Michael Siegel: Thank you.

Jerry Colonna: What you do matters. You're a firewall on the republic. You're protecting the constitution. That's what matters. It matters to the average citizen like me. We can all forget that this branch of government exists unless you're in trouble. These are the things that matter, and we lose sight of these.

Michael Siegel: Your comments lead me to the question about executives and leaders purging old ideas like busyness and so forth from their mentality. Is this what you mean by rebooting?

Jerry Colonna: It does. To lay it out even further, I liken these old belief systems, these old childhood survival strategies as -- in programming, we call it a subroutine. It's an early level of programming usually set in around age five. It sort of runs in the background constantly, just like on your computer, taking up cycle times. For example, for me, one of those belief systems is it's better to be anxious than angry. Because if you're angry, someone's going to get hurt literally. So any time I would start to feel angry, I start to feel anxious.

I have a colleague who, anytime he starts to feel angry, feels confused. When we age, when we become adults, or when we become leaders and have power and authority, one of the things that starts to happen is these belief systems run in the background and they become a cultural norm. So you might have a cultural norm of conflict avoidance within an organization and then people struggle to tell the truth. Then they call on me and they say, Jerry, we have problems. You know, trust in our organization. Now you're not telling the truth. Well, we can't tell the truth because that might create conflict and so we have to avoid that.

You used the term purge. I'd rather use the term lovingly reveal so that you don't need it anymore. Right? Because that's that compassion. Because what happens is, these systems that we put in place, they work beautifully. They are designed to keep us safe from the things that would harm us as children. The problem is we become adults, we have power and agency and they still start to run. Part of the process of becoming a full-blown adult is to reboot ourselves to the point where we say, wait, I actually choose not to do that anymore.

Carl Jung said famously: I am not what has happened to me, I am what I choose to become. There's so much agency in that. There's so much beautiful optimism in that belief.

Now to bring it back to leaders for a moment. When leaders choose not to examine themselves, when leaders choose for their own internal safety reasons to blame and externalize all responsibility, then we create a promulgation of toxicity within cultures. The result is we all suffer because the person who has power is not willing to look in the mirror and say: What am I doing? How have I been complicit in creating these conditions I say I don't want? How does it serve me to constantly feel busy? How does it serve me to constantly convey a sense of urgency - to use Covey's expression - without being able to feel through a sense of discernment about what's important and what's not important?

Michael Siegel: I was struck in your book when you talk about getting up in front of a group of new executives and asking them two questions. (1) Who here is brave enough to admit that they are truly terrified? And, (2), who's smart enough to admit they haven't a clue about how to do this job? Those are quite powerful questions. What kind of answers do you get from the executives?

Jerry Colonna: Well, invariably they laugh. Which is what the intent is really to do. By laughing, what I want to do is normalize two states. One state is anxiety. I don't know what to do. I'm really scared. Who's ever led in a pandemic before? The last pandemic we dealt with was 1918. 1917, right?

Michael Siegel: Yeah.

Jerry Colonna: So all those leaders are gone. That's scary. But it gets worse when we pretend that we're not afraid. And so by normalizing, I don't have the answers. I have to make things up. By normalizing the fact that we have anxiety, we actually lower the temperature of it. We make it less problematic within the organization.

Think of a leader who's able to stand up and say to a group: I don't have the answers. I don't know what to do. But - and this is the important part - I believe in us. I believe in our collective ability to work together to come up with a thing to do that will take us out of this crisis. This moment enables us to take advantage of the opportunity because I believe in our values. I believe in our purpose. I believe in our collective community.

That's the kind of leader that I want. It's the kind of leader I want to be.

Michael Siegel: Yeah. And the second part is so important. Actually, both parts are so important.

Jerry Colonna: Michael, can I ask you a question? You're a scholar on leadership in many ways.

Michael Siegel: I try. Thank you.

Jerry Colonna: One of my favorite things to do is to read biographies. I think of people like Grant or Washington. In my

projected ideal of some of the things that they do, I think of Washington at the end of his presidency. With the kind of gravitas and of wisdom, I think of Washington in the Whiskey Rebellion. I think Washington in the French and Indian War where he was just sort of vainglorious and out there, and ambitious and arrogant. But he got tempered by loss, by defeat, by hardship. I think of those leaders being able to say: I don't have the answer, but follow me anyway.

Michael Siegel: Yes. And the ability to grow as Washington did, which brings us back to your central thesis that leadership is about growing into our full selves. Right?

Jerry Colonna: Yeah.

Michael Siegel: And we have that capacity.

Jerry Colonna: Yeah, when you can step into those situations. So you asked about that sort of joking opening that I do with a lot of first leaders. One of the things that happens is when we step into that unknowing, when we acknowledge that leadership is hard for each of us just as growing up is hard for each of us, then we can access the sense of community that comes. We can access, oh, wait, just like me, you struggle? Oh, so maybe I don't have to be so aggressive with you. Maybe we can be more collaborative. Maybe we can arrive in an answer together. Maybe not everything is a transaction and not everything is adversarial.

Michael Siegel: Yes. This is why networking with our judges, with our court unit executives is so powerful that they can share those experiences.

Jerry Colonna: Until you just said that, it never occurred to me how lonely a job may be as being a judge and the weight that they may carry. I don't know. I'm projecting right now because I've never been in that situation.

Michael Siegel: No. You're accurate.

Jerry Colonna: It's hard. The weight of the world may rest on their shoulders. I often think sometimes the fate of the republic can rest on their shoulders.

Michael Siegel: I want to come back, Jerry, to poetry because you like poetry.

Jerry Colonna: Yeah.

Michael Siegel: So do I. You quote a few lines by John O'Donohue. I want to read them and then have you comment on them: When someone fails or disappoints you, may the graciousness with which you engage be their stairway to renewal and refinement.

What is he saying about being a forgiving leader?

Jerry Colonna: Oh, God bless John O'Donohue. For context, the late John O'Donohue passed in 2008. He was a priest. Those lines come from one of his poems in a book of blessings called *To Bless the Space Between Us*. It's a beautiful book of

blessings for things that you don't imagine. Blessing for the recently incarcerated. Blessing for parents who have lost a child to suicide. Blessing for those who hold power.

That line comes from *A Blessing for a Leader*. What he's saying there is that part of essential leadership is the recognition that we all stumble, including ourselves too. What I read into those lines is not merely the graciousness of those of us who hold power in a superior fashion providing renewal and refinement to those who report to us but also to hold ourselves with the grace of understanding that it is through failure that we rise, that we understand, that we grow. And I love his image of the disappointment being a stairway to renewal and refinement.

Another way to think about this, Michael, is I often will say to my clients you can stop a dog from wetting the carpet by yelling at it and rapping it on the nose with a rolled-up newspaper or by gently reinforcing positive behavior. Here's a treat for going outside. The danger with rapping them on the nose is they're going to pee on the carpet again. Fear is a very, very limited tool for leaders. It works occasionally, but not on a sustained basis. It should be used in times of crisis. Quick. Everybody out of the theater. We're on fire. The problem is we use that fear and retribution as a means to create

compliance. Then the leader just turns and says why doesn't anybody think for themselves.

Michael Siegel: Throughout your book you refer to three powerfully liberating questions that have helped you and those you coach. What are those questions, Jerry?

Jerry Colonna: Thank you for asking that. There are three questions. They actually came to me by way of my psychoanalyst, Dr. Sayres, who passed a number of years ago. I worked with her for 28 years. They are: What am I not saying that needs to be said? What's being said that I'm not hearing? And what am I saying that's not being heard?

Now implicit in all of those questions is an advocacy for speaking truth. The first question was the most powerful question for me because it unlocked a propensity for migraines that I had growing up. In one of those classic ninja moves that a good therapist will make with you, I was complaining about my ongoing migraines. Finally, in frustration Dr. Sayres said to me: What are you not saying that you need to say? It shocked me. It turned out I was not saying a whole lot of things that I needed to say. What a gift to be able to say what's truly in your heart.

In the case of leadership, how about this? What am I not saying that needs to be said? I'm scared; or, I'm a leader and I have responsibilities. But I have a four-year-old at home and

I'm scared to send him to school this fall. Or I have a parent who refuses to wear her mask and I don't know what to do about that. See, there's a fullness of humanity in that question.

Then the following questions: What am I saying that no one is hearing? I'm speaking. Sometimes I speak with my actions, I don't speak with my words, but I'm not being heard. Lastly, most relevant for those who hold power, what are people saying to me, but because of my own programming as a child and my need for safety, I refuse to hear? Like they're suffering, like they're scared, like they need more from me.

I fundamentally believe that when all adults are able to lean into those questions, what gets unlocked is the fullness of ourselves. And if we take it all the way back to those first things that we were talking about - better humans make better leaders - if leaders can organize themselves around questions like that, what ends up happening is they lead from a place of deep and profound humanity that creates trust and community and compassion and collaboration and our ability to face impossible challenges. I mean in a time like this - economic crisis, a racial injustice reckoning, a health crisis that reveals among other things inequalities in our system - this is what we need: compassion, strength. Strength that comes from values. Not from an authoritarian I-have-all-the-answers stance, but the belief in human beings together.

Michael Siegel: What a fantastic set of questions. Thank you for sharing that. Jerry, is there anything else you'd like to tell our audience?

Jerry Colonna: I just want to circle back to what I said before. Thank you for the work that you do. I cannot imagine how hard it is trying to do this. Sitting in your living rooms. Running a branch of the government that, as I said before, is a bulwark against things that were challenges. So I deeply appreciate it.

I also want to thank you, Michael, for inviting me on. It's really been an honor to speak with you about these things. I just hope that the book is a comfort to people and not just a guide.

Michael Siegel: It's a mutual honor. We really greatly appreciate it. Thank you again.

Jerry Colonna: Thank you, my friend.

Lori Murphy: Thanks, Michael. And thanks to those listening. A reminder that Jerry's book is *Reboot: Leadership and the Art of Growing Up*.

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