



## EPISODE 4 - TRANSCRIPT

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:00:07](#)):

Hi, I'm Dr. Sadhna Bokhiria, and this is LeaderVoices, a show about leaders and their infinite ability to change the world.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:00:22](#)):

It's an interesting dynamic when one fills a leadership position that was previously held by a long-term spirited and beloved leader. It's even more interesting when that leader was the founder of their respective organization. How does one assume this role? How does one put their own leadership skills into play? How does one get their organization to adapt to the change in leadership that was previously only held by its sole founder? Both of my guests today are examples of leaders who were passed that leadership torch. Both had to step up and fill some pretty big shoes left empty by their preceding founders. Sounds daunting? Perhaps, but after hearing what my guests have to say, successor success is certain.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:01:13](#)):

I am pleased to welcome Abby Robinson, who brings more than a decade of experience in development, communications and youth leadership development. She is an Atlas Corps Fellow who also served as an AmeriCorps VISTA in Puerto Rico. She is an alum of not just one American Express Leadership Academy, but many including the Independent Sector NGEN Program and the Points of Light Center for Creative Leadership Academy. She served on the board of the One Percent Foundation, which is a group of citizen philanthropists who pooled their funds and time to strengthen their communities while at the same time, increasing their understanding of philanthropy. Prior to her current role, Abby worked as a development strategist for the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, D.C., and The Campus Kitchens Project, which is a national program. And Abby, I need your help with the pronunciation here for the-

Abby Robinson ([00:02:10](#)):

Fundación Escuela Nueva in Bogotá, Colombia.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:02:13](#)):

And in addition to her sexy Spanish-speaking skills, Abby is currently the acting CEO of Atlas Corps, and we are incredibly honored to have her on LeaderVoices today. Welcome, Abby!

Abby Robinson ([00:02:26](#)):

Thank you. Thank you. It is exciting to be here.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:02:29](#)):

I'm thrilled to have you, and that was a mouthful, so many different accolades to list and very inspiring right off the gate. So thank you for that. And I guess we should just kind of start right at the beginning. So you grew up in a tight-knit family in Minnesota, on a farm, and now you're an international social purpose leader. So how did you get from there to here? And did you always envision yourself in a role like this?

Abby Robinson ([00:02:55](#)):

Yes, I am so proud to say I'm a fourth-generation farmgirl, a first-generation college graduate from Northern Minnesota. I love where I'm from, I love my family. They definitely have gotten me to where I am today. And it's so interesting when you think of that question about "have I always seen myself as a leader" and I think it is less, "have I seen myself as a leader" and more of we as a family, we're just always engaged with the community. It was just that expectation, that involvement, or even that opportunity. So we had our family, we had our community, we had our church, we had our activities, our school - just those pillars that you hear about. Those were the key pillars that our family rotated around. So it was more of "what are you doing" and more of "you are going to be doing". And it was just great to grow up in that kind of environment.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:03:51](#)):

So you essentially, from a very young age, became a huge part of your community - community-driven experiences and giving back were very central to your upbringing. And now, you've recently stepped into the CEO position at Atlas Corps and for our listeners who may not be familiar, what is Atlas Corps, and what specifically do you do?

Abby Robinson ([00:04:13](#)):

It is an organization that is based on the idea that talent exists throughout the world and opportunity does not. So what we do is we connect talent to opportunity and how we do that is through our leadership development programs. Our Corps Program is a long-term fellowship. So we bring global leaders to the United States for approximately 12 to 18 months of service at organizations that range from CARE to American Red Cross - even at American Express we have fellows. And we also have recently launched in the past six months, a Virtual Leadership Institute, which is an all-online version of our training programs. And the idea is that we engage these professionals long-term so that they are learning, improving their skills, building networks, and also sharing so then they can bring that knowledge back home and multiply impact. And in our 15 years, we have engaged 1,000 social change leaders from 105 countries. And I am proud to say that I am one of those alum, as you mentioned earlier.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:05:11](#)):

So you mentioned this launch in the last six months to a virtual kind of transition, I'm assuming obviously because of the pandemic and all the challenges of trying to create cross-cultural communities live. And what's also interesting is Scott Beale, the founder of Atlas Corps, is now with the Biden administration as the deputy director of the Peace Corps. And

so we talk a lot about founder syndrome and I wonder what it's been like for you to take over an organization that until now, was led by its founder.

Abby Robinson ([00:05:48](#)):

Well, first I want to say in many ways, it's amazing in that to be given this opportunity, to come from the community as an alum, and to be able to step forth as leader, to be empowered, to be imparted that, especially by the founder, I think is amazing. And I definitely say there are big shoes to fill. And I also always joke that at Atlas Corps, our primary mission is really to develop leaders and then to see them go forth. And over my 10-plus years with the organization, even within our staff, we would say that. And now I say, even our founder, we developed him as a leader and now we are sending him forth because other organizations, such as the US Peace Corps, needs him. And I think about being here now, and it is a great time in many ways for Atlas Corps, because while the past 12 months have presented new to challenges, also new opportunities, it also has encouraged our organization, Atlas Corps, to grow.

Abby Robinson ([00:06:44](#)):

And I am happy that we are at a strong point in that there are good things going on. We have good partnerships, good support, which is all positive. And so that is a great time to step in and assume leadership. And also it's really intriguing to see this shift. And I know I bring a different style, a different energy, even a different focus and I really see my role as one that is paving the way for this transition. And some of the recommendations I've heard or some of the feedback or the articles I've read when you transition from a founder, like some organizations were writing over the course of 12 months or even six months and essentially we did it within 30 days.

Abby Robinson ([00:07:33](#)):

And I'd like to say, that Scott is still very active in Atlas Corps, and he's here to see us succeed. I think, it's obviously something that's personally important to him. Though, I feel like part of our transition is that I'm filling that role in really ensuring that our systems are in place, that our organizational strategy is strong. And that's always been a skill that I've brought to the organization. And so in a way, I feel like sometimes this divine intervention, things align and they happen in a way, because that is the best way they should happen. So I feel like that's why I'm here now and that's why it happened on this timeframe.

Sadhna Bokharia ([00:08:07](#)):

I try and imagine, what does day one look like? "I'm taking over, I'm in, I'm CEO now," what does day one look like? Where do you even start in a pandemic?

Abby Robinson ([00:08:18](#)):

Right? It was a little wild. And I think, the positive was coming off of 2020 and going into the first month of 2021, we had some really solid partnerships that were outlined and so we had some clear marching orders. So we knew things that we needed to do, some programs such as this Virtual Leadership Institute and with our Fellowship. And I think that provided us some stability. And we were also at an interesting place that we hired, within my first 60 days, I think three new full-time hires and then we also brought on a new fellow. Atlas Corps is proud to have Fellows serve in our organization. And so that was exciting, but also intense because it's just a lot of onboarding. I think I had numerous onboarding calls or

interviews with finalists. And I think our team was... While they were doing, they were also ramping up and building our capacity.

Abby Robinson ([00:09:13](#)):

So that was a little while, then I feel now that we're a few months out from that, that we're feeling a little more solid, we got a little more flow, people know what's going on. So, that's exciting. Though, there's still so many questions. And I think my role and what I'm really trying to do is to create a little consistency and normalcy where there are so many questions. So if I can provide some kind of ground floor, I feel like, kind of it's like a water bed or an air mattress. So it's still a little unsteady, but at least somewhere where people can put their feet down. So I feel like that's my role. I can provide a little foundation. And even as things are moving, we at least have something we can have all our feet on.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:09:53](#)):

So let me ask you, you work with global leaders from across all cultures. And we know that just looking from East to West, there's so many different mannerisms and cultural norms, especially when we're talking about leadership. How do you essentially build future leaders that are from such diverse backgrounds? Is there one method? I mean, how do you do that?

Abby Robinson ([00:10:23](#)):

It is an ongoing evolution, and I think it really comes down to the basics. When we talk about our theory of change, we talk about our mission, it is about developing individuals and we develop individuals and strengthen their capacity with the understanding that they are going to be able to achieve impact in any organization or any social issue. So I think in addition to the country diversity, their personal backgrounds, you also have social issue backgrounds. We have people dealing with community health or dealing with monitoring and evaluation activities.

Abby Robinson ([00:10:57](#)):

And so you're bringing that together as well. And that's where the richness is. And I think what we do as an organization is try to create this baseline of experience and knowledge that we're providing that builds everyone up. And I think that's the beauty that happens. And when we talk about the impact and we ask our Fellows or now even our scholars and the number one thing they'll say is the community and who they come out with, knowing, and engaging with.

Abby Robinson ([00:11:25](#)):

And that's where I think the real beauty is, and I think we have some traditions at Atlas Corps and we have karaoke nights and we are all together. We have these orientations and these immersions where we bring our Fellows all together. And there's a night where we do karaoke. There's a couple restaurants, normally in Washington, D.C., is where we do our training. So there's these restaurants, that we have a handshake, we have Atlas Corps pins we wear. And that is the stuff that people engage with. We have this way we introduce ourselves called The Five Facts and I think those kind of elements really help to build this community. And you'll see that people will be joking about those different things, and they'll say, "Oh, did you go to karaoke?" And even during the pandemic, we did QuaranTunes.

Abby Robinson ([00:12:07](#)):

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So we had Fellows participants sending in their songs, and we did a Friday night where everyone just turned on their Zoom call and we danced. And we just had a great celebration. And I feel like that's what everyone needed. And I think those kinds of elements are what bring people together. And it helps unify and what unites us is stronger than what divides us. And we may have different social views or may interpret things differently, but by creating these fun, safe spaces is we can have those conversations. And I think that's what's really going to have the impact because I imagine 20 years from now, when we have Atlas Corps Alumni leading five different countries, they're going to call each other and be like, "Remember that time in Washington, D.C., when we were having picnic during the kite festival?" And, "Yes," and then they're going to come to some economic solution. I'm like, "That is how it's going to happen." And I'm so proud to be part of that.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:12:56](#)):

It sounds like you're creating these safe spaces where you recognize that each individual is going to bring something unique and then you're also encouraging them to be vulnerable. And almost I'd say silly and loved in this beautiful community, which probably helps spark their creativity. So let me ask you, so you said just a couple minutes ago that you also have this thing called The Five Facts when you introduce yourself. What's that?

Abby Robinson ([00:13:21](#)):

Great question. So essentially, it's the key elements we feel that you should know about one another and just a great way for people to get to know you. So it's your name, where you're from, where you're serving if you're a Fellow or potentially where you work and your social issue you care most about, and then a fun fact about yourself. And I think that fun fact is the key, because we always explain it is, "Just give a teaser." It's not a five-minute story about how you did something, it's a quick fun fact of something about you. My fun fact is that I am known as an Olympic canoer in Venezuela and I leave it at that. And then it's great because later on throughout the course of the year, through some gathering or dinner, Fellows and scholars will ask me, "Why is that?" And then obviously I go into that description, but it's just a fun way to get to know people in a quick way and yet on a deeper level.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:14:12](#)):

It spurs so many other questions like, "Why Venezuela? Are your arms made of steel?" That's awesome. Very cool.

Abby Robinson ([00:14:20](#)):

"Was she really in the Olympics?" That is a question now that everyone's going to want to know. Well, you will have to talk to me and I can tell you that story.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:14:26](#)):

So tell me a little bit about your motto. So your motto is, "Make it big." Tell me about where that came from and what it really means in terms of your life and your work.

Abby Robinson ([00:14:36](#)):

Yes. Well, I had the opportunity after my junior year of university, I traveled abroad. I went on a Central American - what was meant to be an English study trip, it turned into essentially a two- to three-month backpacking trip. I was in

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Guatemala City and I was with my sister and a friend of hers that we were traveling. And when we had landed in Guatemala City, our bags had been lost and in a very foolish way, we arrived, I think at 9:00 PM and we hadn't actually made any plans for where we were going to stay. In hindsight, this was a terrible way to travel. This was before internet, and the airport was closing and we don't have bags. And luckily in our Lonely Planet guidebook, found the most amazing hostel with the most amazing owner who became our friend. So the week we had to stay in Guatemala City, we were planning on staying there for 24 hours.

Abby Robinson ([00:15:25](#)):

He showed us around and he brought us to this area, Zona Diez, I think, Zone 10 is what they called it at that time, it was kind of the social district. And I remember we were sitting there wearing, I think, the same clothes on day three, and I was talking, I said, "Do you all just ever have a thought or a motto?" And my sister and her friend were just like, "What?" I said, "I always have this thought in my head, 'Make it big.'" And they're like, "Well, what's that?" I said, "It's just when you're sitting or even when you stretch and you want to make things big and no matter where you are, what you're doing, we're just sitting here having coffee and I want to be present to you."

Abby Robinson ([00:16:01](#)):

I want to be here. I want to enjoy this moment. This is an amazing moment. We're in Guatemala City having coffee, when will that happened again?" And I said, "That's what it's about. It's about making it big, where you are, who you're with, whatever you're doing." And that was a theme throughout that entire trip is just making it big and all these different experiences from the bus stop to... We were able to go to this mountain village and I sang camp songs to kids and they joined me. That was such a life-changing moment of human interaction and how that inspires us. And I think about that trip frequently. And I hope that the people I met on that trip think about this six-foot-tall, crazy American who barely knew Spanish, and I hope it positively impacted them. And I just think about that's how we can have impact on one another and make it big is how you sum it up.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:16:49](#)):

All right. Very interesting. We have a book club where we talk a lot about leadership and best practices and being present. It sounds simple, but it's very difficult to really be mindful and present and take it all in. And you have this energy about you and everyone that I talk to is like, "Oh my gosh, her energy, her energy, she's alive." I talk to a lot of people who are alive and they're the only people I talk to actually. But-

Abby Robinson ([00:17:17](#)):

Otherwise it's a one-way conversation, I suppose.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:17:22](#)):

But are there any habits or daily rituals that you're taking part in that kind of allow you to have this mindset of being present and being focused on making something big?

Abby Robinson ([00:17:36](#)):

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That is an excellent question. I think it is talking to my mom. My mom is amazing. She has this internal joy that she shares with the world and above all the joy she finds from challenge and I feel blessed that she from day one instilled that in us and that centering and centering on the importance of the individual. And I really try to do that when I'm struggling or even going into a call. And I'll admit, it's not every moment that there's someone that you want to talk to or you know what the call is about and you're like, "That's going to be a tough topic." And I pause and I think, "Okay, I don't know how they're coming to this call. They don't know how I'm coming to the call. Let's just assume the best and enter in a positive way because it's going to make it a more product call." And that really helps. It's not always easy - though, it really helps, I think, achieving a better conversation.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:18:39](#)):

So as a woman who's in leadership, are there any challenges that you've come across, any insights that you can share with listeners about how that kind of looks?

Abby Robinson ([00:18:53](#)):

Excellent question, being a woman in leadership. I think, a key opportunity is find other women in leadership or surround you with amazing people. I think, I hear this phrase that you are the definition of the five people that you surround yourself with more often, I think that's so true. And I have been blessed with amazing female connections and leadership in my life, which I think has really helped inspire me. So I think that is A, my first recommendation. And I think that goes for men and women to surround themselves with amazing leaders. And I think also to embrace the differences. I have been married, I think... Well, six years and so the majority of my professional career was as a single woman and you definitely see differences. And I think now being married, I more intimately see there are differences between men and women and we just need to embrace them.

Abby Robinson ([00:19:44](#)):

And I think, I agree with what I've read about women having this more empathetic approach. I do think that in general terms, there is more of a team dynamic that a woman approaches things with and those are all positive. And I think that we should leverage those and then balance those with other types of perspectives. And so that's something, especially now in this role, that I've been thinking about more because as the leadership and as Scott has transitioned out there, I don't have the opposite... Not the opposite, but the difference of his leadership style. And so one thing I've been thinking about more is what are other leadership styles that are not being present because I'm in this leadership role now, so I'm bringing a different energy, so I want to make sure that other energies are represented, so that's always a thought in my head, is how do I balance my approach?

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:20:43](#)):

So with these ongoing complex challenges that - they will continue - how do you, as a leader, continue to essentially dream big and boldly and focus on the kind of bigger picture, vision, and dream and all the ways that Atlas Corps can achieve its mission?

Abby Robinson ([00:21:06](#)):

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For me, it's looking at those individual stories and the way individuals are moving the needle and can move the needle. And one of the dynamics we've talked about... And this actually came out a lot after the Egyptian revolution, we had four Egyptian women who, after the Egyptian revolution, decided to still come to the US for the Fellowship. There was this big question of, "This is a momentous time in Egypt. Should we stay in our country or should we come in there?" Inevitably they decided to come. And they each had very unique perspectives on their involvement in the revolution. One was Tahrir Square. One was a social media advocate and she was being interconnected with everything, so she could keep getting the message out. And one was working at an organization that was involved with civil society development. And when they came to the US, they really saw this as an opportunity that they could amplify their voice. A couple of them spoke on C-SPAN and they got involved in some other additional speaking activities.

Abby Robinson ([00:22:07](#)):

And just in regular conversation, people would ask them about it. And I think that is just a great example of how there are our institutions and they're connecting. Though, we cannot rely on them to have all the answers, because I think we find that our institutions are informed by people, so we need to be informed people. And so, during that time, it really emphasized how this people-to-people connection are going to have real results and having these different communities, whether it's within the Atlas Corps community or other networks people are involved with, we can support one another. We can ask questions, we can challenge one another, and then we can come up with solutions and we can actually send our leaders up to these... And send our people up to these institutions to advance them.

Abby Robinson ([00:22:51](#)):

And so I think that's what it's all about in that there are positive things that happen, there are terrible situations that arise, and then there are individuals who are making impact and that's what we're really focusing. And I think that's what really rejuvenates. And I love, for example, during the past 12 months with the pandemic, we launched this Believe in Superheroes campaign, and we were all about, we think that each one of us is a superhero. And so we shared these stories of alumni and Fellows and even our volunteers and what they were doing during the pandemic on our blog. And it was amazing. I was even recently reading some of these stories and I was just like, "This is amazing. Look at this example in Pakistan of what they're doing, some education. They're translating materials so that people can know some safety protocol. Or even in Nepal, Mehta was doing some activities with women and youth." And I think, that is what's making a difference. So I was really just inspired and that I think helped keep motivate and keep on doing these activities.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:23:53](#)):

What's interesting about your response is it's like I would never expect someone to say... And I love that you say this, it's like, I'm asking a question about the big vision and the mission of your organization, which is international and world-renowned in the incredible work that you do and how do you stay focused on that. And what's remarkable is you're saying, "By focusing on the individuals." I have to take a moment to reiterate that, it's incredible. Give us some advice, have you ever gotten just great advice from a leader that you'd like to share with everyone?

Abby Robinson ([00:24:26](#)):

I think the best advice I've received, and this was during, when I became a Class 2 Fellow for Atlas Corps and we actually used to do our orientations together and was in Washington, D.C., and the international Fellows and there were three

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Americans who were part of this. And Dr. Gary Weaver, who is just this amazing individual in cultural adaptation, did this training. And he talked about, "At those moments, when you feel lowest and you most want to pull in, that's when you need to reach out, you need to call someone, you need to have a cup of coffee, you need to engage." And that advice has stayed with me for more than 10 years. And I think that year I spent in Colombia, I would continually remind myself of that as well as over these 10 years at Atlas Corps. Even in this current role, when I learned that this transition was going to happen, the first thing I did was reach out, and actually reach out within this American Express alumni community.

Abby Robinson ([00:25:35](#)):

And there were a few people that has played the similar role of this transition. And I texted and said, "Hey, can I have a quick chat? Can I have 15 minutes?" But of course, 15 minutes turns into an hour because I need some advice and inspiration. And it was so soothing and inspiring. And so I think that is the most important... The moments when you most want to collapse, curl under the blanket and just be with yourself, challenge yourself to reach out, get support from others, because that is what is going to help you the most. So when you want to reach in, reach out.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:26:12](#)):

Well, thank you so much for joining us. And I look forward to following you and stalking you and your career and your just incredibleness. So thank you.

Abby Robinson ([00:26:24](#)):

Excellent. Well, I have loved our conversation as well and make it big. I encourage everyone and I am so honored to be part of this.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:26:33](#)):

That was the incredible and passionate Abby Robinson. After speaking with her, I now understand what they mean when they say, "Minnesota nice." She's so kind and so wonderful. My next guest is the executive director of Prevent Child Abuse Arizona, a statewide nonprofit organization that is dedicated to strengthening families and protecting children through collaboration, education, and advocacy. She too is relatively new to her role and was passed the leadership torch by yet another amazing founder. Claire Louge is also an American Express Leadership Academy alum and in full disclosure, a very dear friend.

Claire Louge ([00:27:23](#)):

I am originally from Ithaca, New York. I am the middle daughter of three sisters born to French immigrant parents who immigrated to the United States in the '80s. And I grew up in Ithaca, New York, all my life, but I would go to France very often to visit the extended family over there. I consider myself a French American, even though I don't really consider myself French and I don't really consider myself American. I've got that fun first-generation immigrant straddling of cultures here. So I moved to Arizona in 2009 after I graduated from Cornell University, which is where my father teaches. And I did not know what to do with my life - really, really had no idea. And up to that point, I had waited for people to tell me what to do or what I was good at. And then I would pursue whatever that was.

Claire Louge ([00:28:22](#)):

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But at the end of college, no one really told me what that was. The expectations so far would be that I graduated from high school, then I graduated from college. And then there was this big vacuous space called life that was opened up to me. And I was a very anxious person. I continue to be an anxious person, but I was particularly anxious and particularly underconfident at that point in my life. And also I graduated into a recession and so there were very few entry-level jobs. So I chose to do is be an AmeriCorps VISTA, which is a year of service, much like the Peace Corps. It's a one year of service to an organization with the ultimate goal of combating poverty in some way. So I did that in Arizona. I moved across the country, largely to prove to myself that I could do something that was new and scary and just completely face the unknown, which I was afraid of.

Claire Louge ([00:29:33](#)):

So I moved to Arizona in 2009, thinking that I was going to do my year of service, that it would be a year to find myself and possibly develop some professional skills. And here I am in Arizona, more than 10 years later, which is incredible. It's astounding, it's remarkable how life happens, because after my year of service, I joined the organization. I was hired by the organization, that I served with, which was First Things First, our early childhood state agency here in Arizona. And I served with them, or I worked with them for four years after my year of service as a community outreach coordinator, in which my whole job was to go out there and meet as many organizations and people as possible all to promote this idea that early education and early childhood matters, through presentations, through press releases, through media opportunities, through success stories.

Claire Louge ([00:30:33](#)):

Really, I developed these skills to be able to connect with others. And I loved it, even though I was afraid of it, of course, this is a theme in my life that you're going to quickly find. I'm always afraid of something if I haven't done it yet. And oftentimes I'll surprise myself after I try it. So then a few years later, I joined Prevent Child Abuse Arizona, because I deeply respected the founding CEO of this organizing. Her name is Becky Ruffner and she started the organization in... Gosh, well, we're 30, what does that mean? So, in 1989... Oh my gosh. Becky Ruffner started the organization in 1989. And she was the executive director until December of 2019, upon which I took over for her. And that in itself is a whole other story of finding my strengths and discovering that I am also a leader, which was totally a new concept for me, because I have never looked at myself as a leader. Not until the point that I actually decided to apply for a leadership position did I ever consider myself a leader.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:31:58](#)):

One of the first things that you just said is before you came out to Arizona - I'm sure a lot of our listeners will really have this resonate with them - you're in high school and your goal is to graduate high school, get into a college, graduate college, and you kind of go with the flow based on the feedback you get. Talk to me a little bit about how much of a profound impact leaders can have on people, young people especially.

Claire Louge ([00:32:33](#)):

Wow. That's an excellent question. And I haven't considered it in that way before. I think that people have a profound impact on people, even if they're not leaders. When I was younger, and I think this happens a lot, I was taught to be a really good generalist. And this is not answering your question yet, but I do think it's important. The way that we set up school systems is you have to be pretty good at everything. And so I was expected to be pretty good at everything, really

to get straight A's. And that was part of the family value, that you were good at everything, but what that doesn't give you information on is what you love. You can opt to try to be good at everything, but I never discovered what it is that I loved because I was striving to be okay at everything.

Claire Louge ([00:33:30](#)):

And I almost envy people who were not able to be pretty good at everything. They hated something so much that they failed at it or they just didn't like it and so they didn't pay attention to it because they preferred something else. And they pursued that preference with unapologetic boldness, I was never that way. I wanted to be pretty good at everything. And that gave me no information about what I was passionate about. And with someone as impressionable as I was, anyone could have told me, "You are good at something," and driven me to that path. So for example, a more tragic example of this is something that I also lived. So I am five-foot-eleven, and I have traditional European features. So what I heard of a lot when I was a young adult and a late teen, is that I should model because of my height and because of my features.

Claire Louge ([00:34:34](#)):

And I knew that modeling required a certain kind of aesthetic that included extreme thinness. So, because the only thing I had consistently heard in my life, because people looked at me and said, "You should model," was that I should maybe be a model, maybe that, that was the option that would... Since people were telling me that. So that is partially why in college, I developed a pretty severe eating disorder - because I realized that at a size six, which is what I was, that didn't cut it, I needed to be a size zero to two. And because of that influence, because that was what I really believed was the only thing I could do, I attempted to make myself into that, which obviously was miserable.

Claire Louge ([00:35:24](#)):

And I had to recover from that. And so I want to use that as an example, because what we tell young people may be what they strive to become and be very careful what you tell a young person what they should do, especially if it's a problematic industry like modeling. So be careful about your influence - your influence as an adult is powerful. And your influence as a leader is even more powerful. So, yes, Becky Ruffner, I actually met her on the very first day of my AmeriCorps VISTA experience. The very first day that I was working with First Things First, I actually met her. She happened to be on the board of the regional council of First Things First. And I took one look at her and then listened to her and she was confident, sure.

Claire Louge ([00:36:19](#)):

She said things with such grace and clarity. And although I could never imagine myself that poised or sure at that age, it was something that I deeply craved being. And so I remember thinking, "I want to be like that." And so, of course, at first I was intimidated by her because she told it like it was, and she pushed for what she wanted. And I could not imagine myself being that sure of anything, or that bold. And what's incredible and just a gift that I'm so grateful is that I succeeded her 10 years later. How did that happen? I still think that is incredible. Life keeps on surprising me and it usually positively surprises me when I completely face what I'm afraid of.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:37:22](#)):

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Mm-hmm. And I'm just so proud of you because I know what you were going through because I know how you're one of the most passionate people I've ever met. When you were applying to be executive director, I know that it meant the world to you. And everybody knew, everybody knew, there's no one else that will fill these shoes. There's no way, they would have to be complete fools to not put you in that role. Tell me about the experience of feeling like you're ready. First of all, in my mind, you have to have this kind of, "Okay, I'm ready. I'm applying for this." And then the process, the vulnerability of waiting to see if you were going to be in that role that 10 years prior is a reason why you even stayed in Arizona.

Claire Louge ([00:38:20](#)):

Wow. Well said. So the process was a very long one because we knew that Becky Ruffner was going to retire about three years before she actually did. And we knew precisely when her last day would be. She declared, "December 31st of 2019 will be my last day of executive director." And she's a woman who when she says something it's true, it's going to happen. So the board had a while to design a process for creating a succession plan for Becky Ruffner, who is the founding director, by the way. So she had been doing that job for 30 years, so you can't just pick anyone. That said, I did not start off thinking that it was me when I joined the organization six years ago. Of course not. You look at someone as formidable and respected as Becky Ruffner and I think, it would be arrogant to think that I could fill her shoes without knowing what the job entailed or what she did.

Claire Louge ([00:39:20](#)):

But so the reason that I joined the American Express Leadership Academy, the reason that I applied was to answer this question within myself of do I want to go for this? Because I had some leeway, I had some time before the application process even began. So about a year before the application process began, I applied for the American Express Leadership Academy. And this was actually for a couple reasons. One, I wanted to answer that question. "Should I apply? Am I the right person?" Because the thing is, like you said, I really care about the organization and I really care about its mission. I think that child abuse prevention is the most important thing that we can do - it affects everything. Everything else that we care about can be impacted by preventing child abuse. Plus, I love kids so much and no child deserves abuse, so of course, obviously.

Claire Louge ([00:40:13](#)):

So I really care about the organization. I really care about the people in the organization and this organization deserves a leader that can do this so well. And so I wanted to answer the question, "Is that me? Am I even a leader?" Because once again, I did not think that I was a leader type. I was more of a doer. I'm more of an independent creative doer that likes to do a lot of work. But leadership? That to me was different. Plus, what I thought of as leadership or what I thought of when I considered what a leader was, was a very poised, serious, articulate, somewhat icy person, someone who really had to have a thick skin. And let me tell you, I do not have a very thick skin. I am a sensitive person. I am also a very transparent person.

Claire Louge ([00:41:06](#)):

I am a very enthusiastic person. And so the person I knew I was, did not fit with my schematic of what a leader was. So I needed to form a different schematic of what a leader was. So anyways, I joined the American Express Leadership Academy also because I had recently moved to Phoenix from Prescott, Arizona. So Prevent Child Abuse Arizona's

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headquarters are located in Prescott Valley, about an hour and a half from Phoenix. And I had moved to Phoenix recently at the time because my partner had found a job here. And so I continued to work with Prevent Child Abuse Arizona, and I would commute once or twice a week. And also I didn't have any connections in Phoenix. Most of my connections were in Prescott. I didn't have very many friends and so I wanted to do the American Express Leadership Academy because I wanted peers.

Claire Louge ([00:41:59](#)):

And although the education that I received in the American Express Leadership Academy was invaluable, the most invaluable part of the American Express Leadership Academy were the people that I met, who are now some of my best friends and confidants and supporters and hype people. I can't imagine being in this role without my AmEx crew - totally integral to who I am as a leader. So I entered this American Express Leadership Academy, and what it did was it showed me what kind of leader I was, and it affirmed that over and over as the type of leadership that is needed. And that was amazing.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:42:49](#)):

And what is that? What type of leader are you?

Claire Louge ([00:42:52](#)):

I am the kind of leader that shares leadership. I am the kind of leader that leads through my own enthusiasm, my own curiosity, my own optimism, and that fiercely elevates the strengths of other people.

Claire Louge ([00:43:14](#)):

What I have discovered is that leadership is not about me, but it also is absolutely about me. Leadership to me, and really leading an organization that is going to succeed means creating an environment that mimics the kind of world that you want. I find it very ironic and hypocritical when organizations are dedicated to serving people and to helping them heal or to create systems change that create wellness and that within their own organization, there is drama and conflict and toxicity. No, first, start off with how you treat each other within your organization and let who you are be how you work. So that is something I'm very, very committed to. Also, one of my favorite parts of being a leader is that I can point out everyone's strengths kind of at nauseum. I'm sure they're sick of me saying, "Oh my gosh, good job. This is so awesome."

Claire Louge ([00:44:20](#)):

But really, it is about consistently pointing out the strengths that you see and watching them grow. And this is not patronizing, this is not about patronizing someone by saying, "Oh, good job. You did a really good job at that. Wow." It's not about that. It's not patronizing to be affirmed - affirmation is motivating. And so I am a leader who seeks strengths in others and who praises the crap out of them. I don't know if I'm supposed to swear, but who-

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:44:56](#)):

I don't know if that's a swear.

Claire Louge ([00:44:56](#)):

Yeah, it's a light swear. But who really wants to grow those strengths. And it's also to me about shared leadership, I don't consider myself the queen of the organization or the person who makes all the decisions. Yes, I have the final say, but that final say is informed by the perspective of my team, of course. So anyways, that is the kind of leader that I am. And so I am not this cold, poised, perfectly articulate, private, professional person.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:45:38](#)):

So tell me, where do you think... Before the academy, before you recognize how wonderful you are as a leader, you had this perception of this icy, kind of poised, articulate leader, who I also imagine has a lot of walls, and I just wonder where do you think... Because I think that's a normal perception that I have had as well of leaders - that they tend to be... Everything at work is just work and then you never really get to know them, because they're not very vulnerable. They tell you what to do and you just always kind of respect them and you keep distance. These are the kind of things I associated with the boss or the leader. Where do you think we learn that?

Claire Louge ([00:46:31](#)):

I think that professional culture is its own culture. I think that professionalism and the rules around it is a code that is created to contain power. And somehow... I don't know, but somehow we were taught that to be powerful, you need to be cold and distant and have very, very rigid boundaries around you so that you can keep that power. I reject that and I think... Well, I think I reject that because I cannot be that. To me, we can hide behind a language and the attire of professionalism in a way that actually disconnects us from other people and is exclusive and can be racist and can be oppressive and can be exclusionary. So really, the language of professionalism and the code that we have created, I can see that it can be very oppressive. It can be sexist. And so I don't find a use for the traditional professionalism because how I see it is a system to protect power. And I believe that real leadership is sharing power.

Claire Louge ([00:47:57](#)):

That's what it is. Of course, I didn't think I was a leader because I couldn't be who I wasn't. And I think partially, it is because I have recovered from a kind of addiction. So because an eating disorder is really an addiction to food or an addiction to lack of food, it is still an addictive system within your body, within your brain. And one of the first steps of recovery is being completely transparent with your thought process or with your healing process. There is a saying in recovery that you are only as sick as your secrets. And so I think that because I went through that, transparency became very important to me and to my truth and to my sense of connection with others. And I have found in my experience that when I am transparent, it is liberating to other people.

Claire Louge ([00:48:49](#)):

It is liberating. And if I can do something to liberate other people so that they don't need to be a certain way that is untrue to themselves, awesome, awesome. Now what this does not mean is that I have no boundaries. I think that people worry that if there is no professional code, how are we going to have boundaries? "If you have a genial relationship with your colleagues, how will you lay them off or fire them if it comes to that?" I think that you can still do that compassionately and transparently. I think that those professional codes that keep certain people cold and icy and

in power, that's serving the people in power and not those that don't have it. I really believe in shared power. I think that we do better when we share that power.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:49:41](#)):

And I totally agree with you that whenever there's a sharing of vulnerability and this kind of seal of approval for authenticity and transparency, it humanizes, and it allows people to feel comfortable being vulnerable. And it's not to the point where there aren't boundaries, but it gives them permission to say, "Hey, I'm human. And there's things that are not perfect, because no one has that perfection." You know that a lot of my research is on comedians and you may not know this, but the way in which my research started was, I like to think I'm very good at finding patterns.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:50:28](#)):

And so what I noticed is that a lot of the greatest leaders that I was interacting with, they were authentic and they were transparent. They had a lot of humility and they showed vulnerability. And what I noticed with comedians is the same thing. There's this moment where they would essentially accept, do a lot of self-reflection, think about metacognition and really take ownership of different aspects of their personalities. And they would put it out there and by doing that, it empowered them. But it also allowed the audience members to really feel that it's okay. It's okay to be human. I think we put a lot of pressure on ourselves-

Claire Louge ([00:51:23](#)):

To not be human.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:51:31](#)):

To not be human, to not be human. I think maybe it's a shift in leadership. So maybe the "old way" was you work at an organization for 40, 50 years. You go to the work parties, you do what you have to do. It's an obligatory kind of stereotype. You go home, you're with your family, there isn't a lot of room where you're incorporating your core identity into... It's more so, "Do the job, just get the job done." Right? Whereas I feel like the more modern transformation of that is identify your core skill sets, the things that you are really good at that you're passionate about, the things that are unique to who Claire is - bring those strengths to the organization and then identify who has which strengths on your teams, put them in the places where they need to be so that you have the most equipped structure. And there's just so much more humanity. And I don't know if that's a really huge generalization of it, but that's kind of the idea.

Claire Louge ([00:52:40](#)):

You're absolutely right. It's creating community through work versus having work be a separate aspect of ourselves. Listen, work is such a large part of our lives. Eight hours in a day is just so many hours. If you think about it, it's a lot of hours and many people spend more one-on-one time with their colleagues than they do with their families. What a missed opportunity for connecting with another human being if you are in this code of disconnection. I really acknowledge that it's a very millennial way for me to think, and I don't want to disrespect people's need to have certain containers. So to have the professional compartment in their lives where they're a certain way and then a family compartment, and that is okay if that is how you want to do that. But I don't think that everyone should be forced to

bring a certain identity to work and abandon parts of themselves that are very important to their sense of humanity at work.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:53:39](#)):

And I know you might know this, but one of the previous class members was talking about having a leader crush, and he was like, "I have a leader crush on Claire," because it's the way that you lead. And the other thing I want to say is all of the books that we read in our book club, they talk about transparency, tapping into your core characteristics, who you all are, what your values are, all the things that you're living and doing, finding your purpose, what are your values, figure out your why. It's all like, "If you do this, then this will help you do this." And you really encompass just a conglomerate of all of those. And so I feel that even if you weren't in this position, even if you were doing something else, it's just the way you live your life, that makes you a leader.

Claire Louge ([00:54:33](#)):

Whoa, first of all, thank you so much for that massive string of compliments. But what I also hope that this is indicating is that leadership is really accessible. I think I want to make leadership accessible because I didn't think that leadership was accessible before I became a leader because I felt I needed to be a certain way before I became a leader and I just could not become that. I couldn't become this cold, poised, shut-off person. There's an expression that we all know, and it is, "Fake it till you make it." And although that that's somewhat encouraging sometimes, this is kind of the opposite. I am not going to fake it, instead I'm going to say, "Here's how I feel. I do not know how to do this. Anyone have any perspective on this?" Or, "Here's how I'm feeling and really wondering about, and this is the emotion that it's bringing up in me. What do you think we should do in respect to this?"

Claire Louge ([00:55:38](#)):

And when you give the opportunity for other people to share their process and their perspective on really what is real, what you are really experiencing - first of all, that empowers them to hopefully be vulnerable and to learn so that they can actually become who they want to become versus trying to be this fake version of who they think they should be. So fake it till you make it is fine sometimes, but I'm actually right now doing the opposite of that, which is just being transparent with what I don't know which takes courage because as a leader, I think that you're expected to know. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know, but I am absolutely willing to learn and, "Let's learn together," is my philosophy, especially, damn, during a pandemic. So in month three of my executive director role, the pandemic hit and the beauty of that tragedy is that no one knows what they're doing. And so theoretically, I can't fail in comparison to a standard.

Claire Louge ([00:56:46](#)):

So the way that we are doing this is figuring it out while absolutely processing how real it is every step of the way. And I can't imagine doing it any other way. Trying to pretend it's a different way, that's obviously not going to work, right? I cannot emphasize transparency of the process more in not only helping myself, because really it's helping with my learning process to illuminate what I don't yet know and to ask for help in finding out that answer. But also, hopefully it is liberating people to be a fuller, more authentic version of themselves to acknowledge what they do don't know or to acknowledge what they're learning so that that learning can be shared.

Sadhna Bokhiria ([00:57:30](#)):

So now that you're in the role, because obviously you got the job, do you feel different?

Claire Louge ([00:57:37](#)):

I feel different because of the rapid learning that I've been doing. I did not know what I didn't know before this role of about this role. There's a tremendous amount of things to do. A lot of small things that require my attention and a lot of large things that pull my motivation constantly, that inspire me. I think the best leadership development experience for me has been deciding to go for a leadership role because the year before I got this job, I started to imagine myself in the role because I was trying it on in my mind and I was trying it on through AmEx constantly, through the frames that AmEx gave me. And just having that frame led me to begin to go to meetings or conferences or to meet with people in a way that asked myself the question, "If I was a leader, what would I need to know in this meeting? Or what would I need to say in this meeting if I was a leader?"

Claire Louge ([00:58:46](#)):

And just that frame transformed the way that I started to relate to people because all of a sudden I needed to know way more about who they were, about how they partnered with us, about what they loved or what they didn't do, about their families. I became more interested in people because I was trying on being the leader of Prevent Child Abuse Arizona. And because I tried it on, I had this context that I brought to the interview and I think that ultimately got me the job because I was putting myself in the leadership role before I ever got the leadership role. But you asked me how it's changed me. It has strangely, this is bizarre to me, but it's increased my confidence. I thought it would have the opposite effect because there is so much that I know that I don't know still. And there are so many challenges that I have yet to even know what they are. And I kind of apologize to my future self for being so naive.

Claire Louge ([00:59:46](#)):

But in essence, it actually makes me more confident because I know that there's so much that I don't know, but I am willing to learn because I love the organization, I love the work and I really love the people within it. And I think that's going to get me through whatever.

Sadhna Bokharia ([01:00:03](#)):

If you could talk to Claire last year, last year's Claire, what would you say to her?

Claire Louge ([01:00:10](#)):

I think it would've been very different if I hadn't gotten this role, I put my heart into getting this role and there was a very strong possibility I wouldn't get it because there were people who had decades more of experience, decades, going up against me. I know this, but I got it and so I think it would've been very different. I would've had a very different answer if I hadn't gotten it. I would not have done anything differently. I would not have done anything differently because I shared my process and what I was thinking, I just illuminated my process to anyone who would listen, well, that I trusted.

Claire Louge ([01:00:44](#)):

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I was very transparent about how it was going and what I believed my weaknesses and my strengths were. The process made me even more transparent and broken open and because of that, it forged me into who I wanted to become. And that is still a process of becoming, and hopefully it'll never stop because what guides me is curiosity, what guides me is passion. What guides me is this desire to share power and not to power over. And because of those values, I don't think I can get it wrong, even though I'm sure I can make many mistakes. I'm sure I'll make an epic amount of mistakes and I'm pretty embarrassed about what those things are, because I feel so new.

Claire Louge ([01:01:38](#)):

I don't think I would do anything differently and it's largely because of the people that help me along the way. I mean, they could have done many things differently. I mean, they could have chosen to not support me in the ways that they did and I wouldn't have been as successful. So I think one of the last things that I want to emphasize is that even though I'm talking a lot about myself here, I'm talking a lot about my process and my transparency and my authenticity, those strengths were only forged in the presence of others and because of the permission that others gave me to be that person.

Claire Louge ([01:02:17](#)):

So leadership is not something that is formed within yourself. It is something that is formed within community. And an environment like AmEx is that community that can form leaders, it can help you form the leader that you want to be because you can't do it alone. You can read all the books, you can self-reflect, but it really happens in community like everything else that we need to achieve in this world. Thank you so much for having me on, I hope that it liberates someone to be a more authentic version of themselves and to see themselves as a leader, even if they didn't think that they were.

Sadhna Bokharia ([01:03:07](#)):

And there you have it, it's incredibly comforting to know that the leadership torch can be passed from person to person and sometimes even from generation to generation. This is so important because the type of work that the Claires and Abbys of the world do is vital to countless children and people around the world. I'd like to thank both Abby and Claire for being on the show. And of course, thank you for listening. Until next time, keep that leadership torch lit.

Abby Robinson ([01:03:38](#)):

This show is brought to you by the American Express Leadership Academy Alumni Network, the Arizona State University Lodestar Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Innovation and LeaderStories.org. I'd like to thank all the people who make the show possible. Rick Bronson, my producer and co-writer, Caitlin Johnson, our engagement and associate producer, Michael Chang, our project and operations manager, and the good folks at Drift Compatible Productions, specifically our audio engineer, Buck Newman. Without their help and my incredible talent, this show would not be possible. See you next time on LeaderVoices. I hope that what you heard leaves you inspired to lead the way. For more information and to be in the know about the show, visit us at [leadervoices.global](http://leadervoices.global).

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