A conversation with an atypical CEO, ER doctor, firefighter ...

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**SPEAKERS**

Murielle Machiels

Two months ago, I gave a keynote to Discovery Health in South Africa, about a new world of work and how to connect better in it. I had a great time with the top leaders and inspired them to slow down and open their hearts. And there I met an ad typical CEO, Ryan, Noah, we talked a bit and I really liked him because I could see that behind his big chest, there was also a big heart, a big heart and passion for what he's accomplishing within the organisation, but also a big heart for the people he leads. And my feeling was also, Ryan is a rebel leader with a heart. So I want you listeners to know more about him. He has a real rebel side translated in an atypical career. Ryan started as a medical doctor in ER, was an entrepreneur, a firefighter, a husband and father, and now the CEO of a company of over 5000 people. In this episode, he shares his passion, struggles, growth path, as a leader, and how he learned to tame his anger, but also how he takes care of his energy. So be sure to listen to this episode. And if you believe you have an interesting story to share, you are a rebel as well with a heart, don't hesitate to contact me it's Murielle at key leader.com. And we can organise an episode together. Now you might have noticed that my voice is a little bit different from the other podcast episodes. And I have a confession to make. That's because last weekend, I had a party, where I had a lot of fun, I sang a lot. And as a consequence, I almost lost my voice. Now it's coming back. But it's not completely normal yet. But I believe that life is not only about working life is also about having meaningful connections, but also about having fun when you have those deep, meaningful connections, but also combined with fun, that's when life becomes really interesting. So I hope you have that too. This is rebel leader with a heart. Hi, Ryan, how are you? Maybe you can tell us a little bit more about yourself. Hi, Murielle.

It's great to chat. And it's it's wonderful to connect again. It's hard to introduce oneself. Where do you start? Well, I'm a father of beautiful kids, a husband to committed and beautiful and smart wife. I'm a leader in a very innovative and inspiring business. I'm a humanitarian by nature. I'm a doctor by profession, although I think I'm probably a bad doctor now and that I haven't really laid hands on a patient or had to make patient care decisions for some years. And my role is really to inspire a team around me to continue to take this great business and to create world leading thinking and intellectual property and deliver brilliant service to our customers and policyholders. I think, you know, my work life and my personal life are completely intertwined. In my personal life, I've always determined my value and contribution to society by the impact I can have on people's lives and how I can bring meaning to people's lives. That's why I chose to be a doctor. And in my in my role at Discovery, it's about enhancing and protecting the lives of our customers, what can we do to get people to live a healthier life, to think more carefully about the risky behaviours, whether they be financial or driving or healthcare behaviours. And as a result to ensure that they can live longer and live more meaningfully in the years that they do live. And so, you know, their core purpose here at Discovery is so closely aligned to what I personally believe and we all find value that gives me meaning and a good reason to wake up every day.

Wonderful, wonderful. So you're a very atypical leader, then it's not often that we have a leader of such a large organisation because I think it's 15,000 people, Discovery Health, and then being a doctor and I listened to another podcast of yours where you were also telling that you Used to be a firefighter to

your I think just to make sure that the facts are recorded correctly, the group is about 15,000 people. That includes international divisions and South African division, Discovery Health, the team that I run is the largest part of the group. So we are about five and a half 1000 people. It just in the discovery, Health Division, and then I participate on our group executive, which, you know, determines strategy and guidance for the entire group. Yeah, and

you have this wonderful purpose and dream, but what are the challenges you face so that you can make this dream a reality?

Yeah, I mean, they are so many challenges on so many levels. But the opportunity is massive. And so the challenges need to be overcome, right. But I think the most fundamental challenge about our value proposition is that we are seeking to change the behaviour of humans of individuals on a day to day basis, in order to make sure that they can live healthier lives, when you're a doctor, consulting with a patient that presenting with certain risks, the most difficult part of your job as a doctor is getting them to change their habits, like trying to get a smoker to stop smoking, somebody who's overweight, start exercising, somebody who, you know, loves unhealthy food, or has a sweet tooth to eat differently, those are the hardest things possible, much easier to get them just to take a pool. And so in our, to realise our meaning as as a company, we want to get a whole population to, to behave differently, and to mitigate these risks. And that in itself is a massive challenge. So that's at one level, a very human challenge. And, you know, our approach is around incentives and rewards. We think that a positive framing of an incentive linked to behaviour change is far better than the old fashioned stick approach of what would happen if you don't change, right. Although that said in behavioural economics, loss aversion is quite useful, too. But but it's a whole separate debate. So I guess that's the biggest and most fundamental challenge, we want to buy 25 Get 100 million people across the world more physically active? And how do we get people to change that behaviour. At another level, of course, there are many other challenges which are, you know, much less societally relevant, but very important to my role. I've got to inspire a team and keep the team inspired to run our business. And, you know, just inspiring a team and normal working life has become much more challenging through this COVID period. And, and the world today. And, you know, there are workforce challenges around flexibility, opportunity, communication, and engagement that make it much more challenging, challenging, just on a day to day basis. And then, of course, there are, you know, more micro challenges here in our industry itself, you know, regulatory issues, competitive challenges, much smaller challenges that we deal with. So I would say probably, those are some of the categories of challenges though, we could spend a long time on them.

Yeah. Yeah, the first one changing habits is, is really important as well, if we want to change how companies are run today, it's all about changing habits, since culture is the sum of the habits of, of people. So it often starts with you and then your management team and the rest of the organisation and then your customers in changing their habits. So yeah, thank you for that.

Discovery. Discovery, Muriel, you know, the one advantage we have is that we are a very nimble, agile business despite our scale. And we always think of ourselves as very changed ready. So unlike typical bureaucratic corporates change, internal changes is much easier, often more so than external change in our business and in our experience. So we welcome the opportunity to change and to be flexible. I think the part that I'm finding hard and as a leadership team we're finding hard is what is the right change at the moment, you know, the world is going through such a world workplace shift. That I don't actually know what the right thing is. Is is permanent work from home. The right thing is hybrid. The right thing we losing out on some interpersonal connections? How much time in a hybrid world should we spend in the office? Do you make it mandatory to spend that time? Or do you just create incentives to bring people back to the office? Do you allow people to work remotely from anywhere in the world in an environment in which typically, we've all sat in rooms together and enjoyed connectedness in our decision making and consensus process? So I think, from a discovery point of view, it's not the fact that there is change, it's that it's hard to know, in this early stage post COVID, what is the right change? is gonna work best.

Yeah, and especially since the right change for discovery might not be the right change for another company. So it's all about experimenting, and moving forward and trying and failing and trying again, which also requires a new kind of mindset, of course. But yeah, that's, that's all about these uncertainties that we have today are not easy to, to manage. So how do you manage those, you yourself all these uncertainties and making decisions when you don't have all the elements, and maybe will never have?

You mentioned experimentation, and that, for me is one of the core principles. I mean, I've been saying to my colleagues, and, you know, in the leadership of the group that I think we need curiosity, as a core principle, at this phase of, of the evolution of the workplace, and we should be empowering leaders at all levels, to be curious, around experimentation and around learning what works best. That that you won't need to be brave to do that at scale. Because you've can very quickly lose control. And that sense of loss of controls, is a very scary one in an environment that's always been very ordered and controlled. They've always all just been in the office and work together. What does that mean? And are we prepared to take those risks around the loss of control? So I think the one principle is curiosity, linked to that, something that I've applied throughout my leadership life, and which for me, is a very important quality in my own leadership, I think that we do need to be comfortable with uncertainty. I think we need to be able to make decisions sometimes with not all of the information at hand. I think we also need to be able to navigate periods where, where the right thing is uncertain. And we were prepared to try different things or live comfortably through the uncertain period until the chips fall, as opposed to rushing it forcing a definitive solution, seeking certainty, and then maybe finding out that you've landed up in the wrong place. Yeah, so I think one of the emotional quotient measures of a successful executive leader at scale needs to be somebody who can live with uncertainty.

Yeah. And so you think curiosity and living with uncertainty, but in my experience, to have this curiosity, you also need space. So you need space to explore you, you need some some space for things to emerge, and for your attention to go to new things. So how do you create that space? Do you have that space? And how do you create it also, for the people within your organisation?

You're I mean, you could interpret your, your term space in lots of different ways. You know, space could be the permission to have these experiments. And that I would say, We're doing that and we're giving people the latitude I certainly am. You know, when from a group perspective, it leads to some discomfort, because is it okay, that we're doing inconsistent things in different parts of the group? Whereas, you know, we do have a culture, which is quite a powerful culture, which we're very proud of, and we want to maintain and how do you protect the culture, if you're developing these pockets of inconsistencies, even between business units or within a business unit? So that's one definition of space. The other definition of space could be the time the yes, you know, the just to declutter your diary of the of the day to day things and give yourself the time to think through and work through these things. And our culture of discovery is one that work right, in most cases is the remedy to the most problems that we face when we're faced with a vaccine problem, which often in our environment are highly complex. response is often a very high work rate to overcome that, which is I think, but potentially the opposite of the space you're talking about. In other words, work harder and do more. Not give yourself time and free a delay. So it's a complex answer to your question about space, but probably on balance, if you're talking about enough free time. Personally, my answer is I have no free time. You know, I'm running from one thing to the next. After our engagement with you, earlier in the year, when you spoke to us about resuming interpersonal connections, you use terminology like, like planned spontaneity, which in itself is a conundrum. I mean, how do you plan spontaneity, but we did implement something called timeout Tuesday's as a direct result of your influence. So thank you for that. Work. We have a rule on Tuesday mornings, that our team, our leadership team may not email each other may not set up formal meetings in a diary and they must have space coming to your term space. And it's been incredibly successful. They've been real concerns in our leadership team around what kind of behaviours this is going to elicit. But it's been incredibly successful. People get to do those important pieces of work that are not necessarily urgent. You know, you've got to in trays on your desk of every leader, you've got an intro of the stuff that's important and urgent needs to be done. And then you've got one, which is the important stuff but not urgent. It's critically important, it's probably strategic of nature. But it doesn't have to be done in the next day or week or month, and that stuff tends to get neglected. Well, these choose them, these timeout Tuesday's have given us time for that in trade. I've used the time to plan calls to other executives, or other leaders in the business without necessarily an agenda, but with a rough feeling in my mind of what I'm wanting to achieve. But that's the plan spontaneity that you were speaking about. shedule the call make a note that on Tuesday morning, I'm gonna phone this person, I don't put it in their diary, but I pick up the phone and do it and, and connect with an end in mind, but also just allowing some spontaneity in the conversation. And so we're trying to create space through some of your influences. Well,

yeah, and that's, that's my battle are you You, as a doctor, then you had the Battle of changing habits, my battle is to change that specific habits. Because working hard and being busy all the time isn't the most productive way of handling today's uncertainty and uncertainties and fast pace of change. So it's all about slowing down, stopping to then accelerate again. But otherwise, we get in this in this loop of always working operationally and not structurally solving things, or be creative, to find a one thing that might probably save hours or weeks of work. Yeah, thank you very

enough, I buy that theory. I mean, it is harder to do in reality than it is to talk about right. That's my experience. And particularly if you have a personality like mine, which is that when my people asked for me to be involved in something will ask for my help. I want to be there. I want to lead by example. And and, you know, in an organisation of scale, not only operationally but with a strategically complex set of problems. It's quite a difficult thing to do to create that space.

Yeah. But that's also leading by example, when you say, now I need some space, even if it's to take care of myself or my energy. It doesn't mean you're saying no, but it's also leading by example. That's what I believe. And you also said in one podcast that you are too authentic. So I'm curious about that. Why would you say that? What's the downside of being too authentic?

I think the team that works with me would answer this better. And they would attest to the fact that sometimes I just say exactly what's in my head most of the time. And you know, that can sometimes be perceived as a bit tactless. It's not that I don't choose to engage a filter before I do. So it's that I prefer that stuff. I want to be treated that way. I want to be told exactly what somebody is saying or thinking. And I and I do the same unto others as I would like done to myself, I prefer to get it between the eyes. And I do that back. I think why I say it's too authentic is because I don't really modify that style match for the audience. And sometimes, you know, an audience, an audience of one or a larger audience may not be ready to hear some of those things, and one needs to be more nuanced. And I think that's my translation of being too authentic.

All right, yeah, I understand that. And I agree, I'm also very authentic. But sometimes I notice when people are not ready to, to hear what I have to say, sometimes I don't and I say it. But sometimes, like you say, Yeah, it's nice to to notice what people are ready to hear or not. And then you said, You made many mistakes, and you learn from those mistakes, you've learned a lot of things. So I wonder, when you're making a mistake? How do you feel at first? And where do you feel it in your body?

For me, that's a very simple answer, I feel it right behind my belly button. I get an knot in my gut, which I took a long time through my leadership growth to understand, but now I've come to trust it. And I can feel when when it is going the wrong direction. And when I'm doing something that is not best serving to myself, or the organisation or the leaders around me. And I've learned to trust that to the extent that that is a warning sign to meet to change direction. It's quite interesting, you know, that in the study of psychiatry and psychology, the psychosomatic manifestations, the physical manifestations of psychological thoughts, syndromes, feelings, mood changes, and so on our direct or a direct link. And, and mine is a somatic response. Yeah, that to that cognitive realisation, or that sub cognitive realisation, I have another weakness as a as a human being, this is more so than a weakness as a leader, which is that I historically have been quite quick to not lose my temper, but to anger. And I've learned warning signs in my own body around that too. You know, I, I get a bass, I get a feeling of being outside of my own body, I get almost one could describe a ringing in my ears, and I've come to recognise that and be able to stop that feeling and that, that emotion, surfacing long before it actually surfaces and, and changes my behaviour. So in my case, these are systematic insights, that allow me to change, change the way I lead or behave.

Yeah, that's really great that you came to notice that because that makes the whole difference, because I believe leaders today need to respond, instead of react to situations. But to be able to respond, we need to free ourselves from these automatic behaviours like getting angry. And like you did identify what is happening inside of us, that will be the trigger to a certain reaction that will probably not serve us at the end. And then when you notice it, you're able to change it. So that's very powerful. And do you manage to, to get the other leaders of your team and within your organisation to notice that?

Yes, people who've worked with me for a longer period of time, are very able to recognise that I'm better at some of those things. Because I am able to laugh at myself. And I'm often able to sit with leaders after I have made an error in leadership and laugh at how badly I handled the situation or how I could have handled it better. And so, in that same authentic style, you know, I am told occasionally by people that have worked with me for a long time. Well, you know, in the old days, you probably would have got quite angry there, but that was a much better way to handle it.

Yeah. Yeah, and that's what I see a lot with leaders, as leaders, we know a lot of stuff. But sometimes when we're under pressure, the old behaviours come back of being angry or impatient. And that makes all the difference in empowerment and inspiration and having people following us when we manage to respond instead of, of React, and then being authentic, of course, but have you managed also to, to teach or help otter leaders within the organisation to notice that? And to become more, I would say, grounded leaders?

I hope so, Muriel? I mean, again, I think you'd have to ask them. But, you know, in fairness, I'm surrounded by some absolutely brilliant leaders, some of whom are smarter than me, have stronger EQ than me. And I'm proud of that. I think good leaders appoint people around them who are better than them. Because that does drag me forward and drag the organisation forward. And so certainly, when I recruit senior people close to me, I want them to be better leaders than I am. So the first qualification to your question is to say I'm surrounded by brilliant people. And I learned from them as much as they learned from me. So there's no hubris in my response. But I do think over time, what's given me a lot of personal satisfaction is working with some executives who, through open discussion and authentic engagement over time, have been able to make themselves into better people and better leaders, just through a realisation and recognition of some of their, their own challenges and opportunities as leaders. I've never met a perfect leader. I mean, I don't know if there is such a thing. Or the other way of saying that in a less positive in a more positive way is that every single one of us as leaders is areas of growth, every one of us. And so I've seen lots of people around me growing together with me. And that gives me a huge amount of pleasure. It's one of the best parts of my role.

Yeah, great. And because

I can, I can think of one particular executive, female executive who I work very closely with who I actually spent an hour with this morning, catching up. Her and I used to have a very difficult relationship, she misunderstood me, I misunderstood her, we went through a facilitated process with a third party. And we both sit back and reflect now and and realise how much we both grew. Our working relationship is in a brilliant place, I would go beyond that. I would say that on a personal level, we're actually in a very strong place, where, you know, we share personal reflections, stories and feelings. And it's been very good for the business, that it's also been very good for both of our developments. And that is probably one of my personally biggest victories in my leadership time.

Yeah, well, what you're saying there is really key. And that's what I see is often lacking in teams, is to have a great relationship, you need to have great conversations. And that means go deep in the conversations. But it also means that you have to allow yourself to go deep in your vulnerability and share some stories or how you have how you feel with others. That makes all the difference. Because the deeper we go, the stronger the trust, the better the team. That's why it's also so important to have these discussions. So it's it's great what you did there with, with that colleague.

Well, it wasn't all me it was both of us was 5050. But the one thing I do find easy is exposing my own vulnerabilities. I don't know for some reason, I mean, we're all we all find are uncomfortable with various things. I've never been uncomfortable with it. I think that's human. Yeah. And so I you know, I think exposing your own vulnerabilities, you're right, in some way does lead to a much, much more trusting long term. situation if you can resolve those with the person across the table with you.

Yeah. And that's where I think we should have like structural conversations about how we feel about Yeah, our struggles, our dreams with each other and not only about the to dues and the next tasks that we have within the team because otherwise you don't get this curiosity and Being able to handle uncertainty is easier when you do it with a team that you completely trust. Of course,

he will with balance. You know, you also need to make sure that you're addressing the business prerogatives and that you're spending enough time on the business issues and that you're hearing them and that you focused on this and that the work rate is adequate. So that soft, fluffy stuff, which I believe in, and I don't mean to use terminology that makes it sound unimportant, it's important, but it can't consume every one on one. You know, it needs to be within within reason. No, I

agree. Yeah. But it's often because there isn't a trust that people don't they're saying the hard truth to each other. Because I have to be able to admit that Yeah.

I have had an experience with with a boss that I worked for, who was all business. And that led. I mean, to your point, as I think back now, it led to no trust. I think there were other issues that undermine trust, but part of it was that there was no connection. You know, and so, so I agree with you, I think I'm just putting a check and balance on it that it's got to be in my view within reason.

Yeah, of course, of course. But in my view, it isn't within reason, in most companies, especially now that we're working a lot in, in the remote sphere. It's all about business, and not enough about the human connections. And we're all humans first, before being business people.

You're, I think, what's changed there. My insights on that last comment of yours, it may not be what you do typically in your one on one meeting. But because there's so much remoting. Now, in virtual meetings, you tend to go from one virtual meeting to the next, what you don't do is walk to the bathroom, which for me, is 30 metres away, I quite like that it's 50 metres away. I quite like that. Because on the way there, I pop my head into my colleagues office, I see another person. And we end up standing and chatting. We talk about a business issue, we catch up on an unrelated issue, that interstitial communication in the remote environment that's gone. And then you have to be much more discreet and definite about carving out time for that.

Yeah, that's that's the plan. spontaneity. Yeah. Yeah. Okay, so you said you were okay to be vulnerable? So I have a question because I see you're a very responsible, hard worker driven, committed, you really want to do the right thing you like to have you like having an impact and call yourself a problem solver. But how do you take care of yourself? And also, you're nice with other people, I've seen that also, I saw I saw that people like you. But are you also nice with yourself? And what do you do to be nice with yourself?

You're i I've developed a kind of a rhythm, I am quite an obsessive compulsive personality, not to the extent of having a disorder of any kind, but certainly in my habits, and in my personality type. They are obsessive compulsive tres. And so I developed quite a rhythm in my lifestyle in every respect. And from a work and personal balance perspective, I use my exercise regime as my sanity, and it really works for me, you know, and everybody's got to find what works for them. But for me, making sure that I do 45 minutes to an hour of exercise every day. I do it mostly with a friend who is you know, a close personal friend. And I try very hard wherever possible to avoid any connectivity during that period. And so what that allows me to do is it gives me a social period that is structured and diarized daily. It allows me to be physically active, which I found is very good for my mental well being. I like to feel and stay healthy and fit. And it's almost therapeutic. So that's part one of my rhythm. Part two, which I've actually done since ever since my kids were were kind of probably six and six years old, and I have dinner with my family every night out And so even if I get home late from work, they wait for me. And we sit around the table together, and we have dinner together. And when they were small, they were a standard set of recurring questions, you know, how was school today? What did you do there, you know, now we talk more about current affairs, and you know, the world and global developments and so on. But that connection time of about another 45 minutes or hour is very meaningful. And then I can go back and work in the evening after the dinner feeling like I've connected with my family, and I've connected with myself. And I really, really enjoy that rhythm. I really do. I think the third answer to the question is that I take great holidays, okay, because I don't get much free time, honestly, in the normal workweek. But I do take great holidays. It's a characteristic of discovery, my boss here at Discovery, the founder, he always seems to take great holidays, and I think I've learned some of that from him. And so those holiday periods or, or, you know, proper, clear time, enjoyable family time, a real break from work. And so I found that the mental refresh that gives me the clarity of thought the ability to think creatively and the energy. That's amazing. I feel it when I get back from those periods.

Yeah. And what about the self talk, because in my experience, in the health sector, people are used to taking care of others. But they're not so used to taking care and being nice with their selves. And so the self talk can often be very hard, like, you should have done this, you should this you should Did, did you have to work on changing your thoughts as you grew in the organisation and became the CEO of a large organisation.

I'm not good at that material. I'm bad at that. I am extremely self critical. And my wife, who is a great support to me and a very smart person, she feels I'm overly critical on that. I'm extremely hard on myself on, you know, decisions I've made in the past that perhaps I handled poorly, or even things now that I could handle better. I'm a very strong self critic. I just can't find two way to box out of that. And maybe I need some, some counselling and professional support on that. Because I you know, I feel like, I feel like I could do better on a lot of things. And I'm very self critical. Much more so of myself and others much more. So.

Yeah. Okay, thank you for being honest with with. With that, I, I used to be very self critical as well. And I still am till a certain point, but I, I really learned to be nicer with myself. Because it's very hard in today's world, to be perfect. Like you say, it's just impossible and perfect. People are hard people to follow. So when I showed up as this Wonder Woman, I had less people that followed me and my vision, I wasn't as inspiring as Yeah, as when I started to simply share what I was feeling and my doubts and and my fears. And to be nice with myself also in my thoughts.

Very interesting. People are drawn to human weakness as opposed to be drawn to a facade of pure strength, yet many leaders feel they need to be just absolutely strong and nothing else. So

yes, yes.

It's quite a conflict in paradigms.

Yeah. And that's the big shift that is happening today is that we don't want the powerful efficient leader anymore. We want the one we can relate to. And that, of course, has a vision and is strong, but showing our vulnerabilities is a strength. It requires much more strength than then hiding behind a mask. And that's, by the way an exercise I do with a lot of leadership team teams is about identifying the mask and learning to know each other beyond that mask, which makes such a difference in in the dynamic afterwards.

You're I must say you know the The business person I probably respect the most. And there's bias in my response, but it is defines partly why I am where I am is my boss, Adrian Gore, who founded discovery. And but he's the guy with the highest work rate as close to a perfect leader as it gets, of course, not perfect. Everybody's imperfect. And I, you know, I work with those imperfections, but, but somebody who's just a brilliant leader, who actually is more in the mould of what you're saying people are moving away from he is the super efficient, super brilliant, super innovative creative person who leads in case simultaneously, you know,

no, but you can still be very efficient. And but like you say, it's also about caring about showing when you have doubts about Yeah, showing your vulnerabilities admitting a mistake, saying sometimes, you know, I don't know. I know, we'll know at some point, but now, I don't know. Maybe you can help me. Yeah. So it's both. It's not that we don't need to be efficient anymore. It's just not enough. It's, if you remember, I think I presented it in the, in the keynote, we have seven levels of consciousness, and leadership levels. And those were the basic levels that we still need, but we need the other levels as well now. And for those levels, we need to dig deeper in ourselves. All right. Well, thank you very much, Ryan.

Thank you, thanks for the opportunity to chat and, and to share my own views. And I've enjoyed this conversation very much.

Thank you. I've enjoyed it as well. Yeah, you finished another episode of rebel leader with a heart if you want more, go to rebel leader with a heart.com For show notes and past episodes. If you love the show, subscribe, leave a review and share it with a friend the more the merrier. Thanks for tuning in and have a great week you rebel leader with a hearts