

CHAPTER 3: AN INVITATION

“After living with their dysfunctional behavior for so many years, people become invested in defending their dysfunctions rather than changing them.”

—Marshall Goldsmith, *Author, Leadership Coach*

Having grown up surrounded by 12-step programs, the serenity prayer has become deeply engrained in my beliefs. Written by Reinold Niebuhr, it goes, “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” The words serenity, courage, and wisdom in particular have always stood out to me, and speak to me as an invitation to act.

I always start with courage, which is simply taking action despite the fear or resistance you may be facing. Since I was young, I have always been told that the only one I could change was myself. This annoyed me to no end during my teenage and young adult years, mostly because it was so true that it was hard to hear and accept. For me, having courage to change is actually having the courage to change myself. Whether it is a belief, an action, my mindset, my perspective, or one of my many habits, I have to have courage to change myself.

When I dig a little deeper and think about whether serenity or wisdom comes next after courage, it seems that wisdom wins out in almost every situation. I first reflect on what I might need to change—the courage to change is always my starting point—and, if nothing comes up, I feel a calm settling in, telling me that this where I need acceptance. Wisdom guides me between courage and serenity.

So here it is, my invitation to you. I invite you to have the courage to connect to yourself through the practices of mindfulness and empathy for the remainder of this book. I promise you it will not go unrewarded. It could get messy and perhaps sometimes painful, and that's okay. Take a breath and find the courage to keep moving through the resistance.

Connect to Mindfulness

When I look back to my childhood, I know now that I was just picking up on the emotions of everyone in my life. I didn't have the skills, knowledge, or the resources to be able to deal with all of those emotions. I had no language around emotional intelligence, or how to separate what I was feeling from what everyone else was feeling. When I would get too overwhelmed with people, I would focus on the results that needed to happen. Even to this day, if I'm not careful and don't remain completely conscious of my actions, feelings, and thoughts, I can end up in a place where I think, "If I just get it done, everyone will be happy".

The periods of my life when I've damaged relationships as a leader, both professionally and within my own family, have happened when I've slipped into a results-oriented approach only, instead of blending in the empathic, people-oriented approach.

The struggles between me and my mom were real, but it was because we were both battling from the same place of 'just let me do it.' She was the mother. She wanted to be able to take care of us. She wanted space to be Mom. And I now see the same struggle playing out between me and my own daughter. She's highly independent, very self-motivated, and enjoys stepping into the role of caregiver in our household.

She worries deeply about her brothers and her father and I, and at the same time, wants to be a kid, have free time and play dates just like her brothers. I don't know that I'll get it right, but I'm trying to help her navigate the space as she moves from child to woman.

At time of writing this book, I have been a mom for 13 years, and I can honestly say that not a day goes by that I don't struggle with 'doing it all'. I work daily on creating space for others to help me. The first step is to invite others to do so. Next, there must be space for people to help—real space, not passive aggressive, quasi space where help isn't really wanted. This approach of creating space and inviting help applies both personally and professionally, which is why I work on this practice daily in all aspects of my life.

I want my children to learn how to take care of themselves first. I want them to be able to feel their emotions, to articulate them so that others understand, and to have space for others in their life. At the same time, I also want them to be aware of other people. We have many conversations around these topics, and I am fully aware that I won't know the effectiveness nor the effect of these conversations for many years to come, but it doesn't stop me from trying. My children need to know how their actions and behaviors affect others and how small, simple adjustments can have deep, lasting results.

Just because I'm teaching my children about taking care of themselves, doesn't mean I've learned everything there is to learn. As an adult, I'm working on how to enjoy playtime and creating free time to spend with my children. I'm learning how to take better care of myself, so that I have more to give to others. And I'm figuring out that relationships are just as important as any task or result when stepping into a leadership role. Even when I volunteer at the kids' schools, I'm continuously amazed by how taking the time to build relationships helps the work get done almost effortlessly.

While the past plays a role in who we are and what we've learned, it does not dictate your future. Let me say that again. The past does not dictate your future. We get to choose in every moment going forward who we are going to be. We get to decide if the behavior we are choosing is serving us or limiting us.

This is my invitation to you, to move into a space of connection with yourself, those you love, and those you lead. Give yourself the permission and time to test and try on some new things, to make mistakes, to experience what works and what doesn't work, and to adjust in your role as leader.

Invite your team members (personal or professional) to a conversation about what they need, how they like to communicate, and what truly matters to them. Team members

include anyone with whom you are trying to accomplish a goal, such as family members, children, professional colleagues, mentors, advisers, or volunteer committees; anyone on your team should be a part of the conversation.

The guiding principle behind empathic leadership is that there is no “one way” to lead, because each person is unique and each situation is distinct. We must engage with and know our teams so that we can respond appropriately and with higher effectiveness. We must be fully present and connect in the moment, and to do so, we must connect with ourselves first.

Connect to Empathy

As I continue on my journey, I am able to better understand why I continue to see teams of like-minded people, and why diversity is so hard to achieve. (For the purposes of this book, I define diversity as an understanding that each individual is unique and as a recognition of our individual differences along dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, or political beliefs, just to name a few.)

Left to my own devices and without conscious thought, I would unintentionally create a team of people who thought,

acted, and behaved just as I do. The reason for this is simple: we can communicate easily with people like us and are better able to understand each other's perspectives and behaviors. But, if we build a team of like-minded and like-skilled people, we reduce our ability to innovate and are unable to push ourselves and others to achieve more. If I do not have a team with skills and strengths to complement my weaknesses, how can I ever do more than what I see as possible or what is already within my reach?

I didn't begin my leadership journey appreciating empathy as a skill to hone. In fact, in my early career years, I fought my own empathic reactions. I had always been told that I was too emotional, that I needed to learn how to have a poker face, that I should be tough. I had been trying to fix this perceived weakness for decades and was really getting nowhere. It wasn't until I read a piece on empathy that my thoughts completely shifted around what it means to be emotional.

Empathy is the ability to relate to people, to see and feel what other people are seeing and feeling.

Understanding empathy in this light transformed my own definition and perception of this ability I had. I was actually quite good at empathy; the ability to feel what other people were feeling, had been bringing up emotions for me for so

long in my career. I just didn't understand that's what was going on. I began to realize that this was something I did not want to fix; rather, it was something I needed to learn how to channel and use to my advantage.

I already understood what each of my team members was feeling, when somebody was engaged or disengaged, when someone was on the fence, and who was highly motivated and ready to dig in to do the work. What I began to understand was that not all people have the highly-developed empathic abilities I had. I could leverage my abilities with other leaders, who could use my empathic approach to leadership to help them build high performing teams. Not only could I use it in my own leadership journey, but I could help other leaders in their journey.

Later on in the book, in Part Three, we will talk about practical ways to develop the skills required to be an effective, empathic leader, which you can implement immediately. In the next few chapters, though, I want to spend some time on why leadership matters at all, to describe what it feels like, to explore what's important to know about leadership, and to defeat the most damaging myths.