

LEADERS in Action

Jason Womack interviews JOANNE RENCHER



With 25 years of business leadership experience, Joanne Rencher served as the Chief Business and Talent Officer at the Girl Scouts of the USA. Joanne provided strategic leadership, with a focus on increasing investments and elevating the brand through GSUSA's unique physical properties, history, and collections. With her passion for developing business leaders across the HR field, Joanne founded Who's Got Next in HR?, Inc. - a membership based organization challenging conventional wisdom around career paths for HR professionals who dare to ask 'what's next?'

Q&A

Jason Womack: *Do you have a simple way to think about how leaders get better?*

Joanne Rencher: What comes to mind immediately is that we should be making time to think. I'm a believer in what I call "White Space" and getting above it all, into the balcony. It's our job to press the pause button and look around our environment very deliberately and intentionally and ask: "What are the trends? What do I need to be worried about? Where do we have strengths as a unit, and how do we learn more about where we'll need to be?" Leaders are lifelong learners as things are evolving daily. We need to use all our tools to our advantage.

So, absorb new information and give yourself the time to think. Get up to the balcony, don't just be busy...be productive too! You can't figure it out if you don't pause and make the space to do that.

JW: *What was your Defining Moment as a leader?*

JR: As far back as I can remember, I've asked "Why?" At times it was irritating to my parents or teachers, but I was genuinely curious. To this day, I want people to explain "Why?" we're trying to solve a problem we face. It's that curiosity and ability to get to the heart of things that makes for strong and sustainable leaders.

In 2015, I concluded a speech saying, "It's time for HR professionals to think about themselves. If you're not willing to settle for less, come see me after the keynote." I looked up and there was a long line of people. I stood and talked with the people in line for an hour or more. That was the birth of what is now a membership organization, "Who's Got Next in HR?" that continues to grow. I feel it is my calling to help people find out what's next for them. Those who may want desperately to challenge the status quo, move outside of the box in the organizational chart, and go to that next level – to the C-suite, across it or even to the top seat.

Continued

Q&A with Joanne Rencher

In our interview, Joanne shares insight on a disciplined process to failing; the importance of asking 'Why?'; and the concept of 'White Space.'

Joanne continues to develop business leaders across the HR field by challenging the status quo.

JW: *What will leaders increasingly need to include that up until now they may not have had to study in great detail?*

JR: Future leaders are going to need to be a lot more comfortable with failure. Our founder, Juliette Gordon Low was a trailblazer. Why? She wasn't afraid to fail. She was comfortable creating and inspiring, not always knowing what would come... Be willing to fail, be a smart risk-taker. That's where the trails are blazed. That's how you pave the way for something that's new and important and different. What you think is comfortable today just might surprise you tomorrow.

That's where innovation comes from. When you enter a project, you might have a way of thinking that will be tested. You can be organized and thoughtful while iterating along the way, and even failing on your way to success. There's a disciplined process to failing. Be cognizant and sober that things aren't going to go the way you thought, learning throughout the process. Remember to pause; get up on that balcony and look around!

JW: *What do you think are the most important questions effective leaders need to ask of themselves?*

JR: "Am I doing this because I want to be liked? Or, am I doing it because it's necessary?"

In the moment, you may want to make a split-second decision to make a statement or challenge something that's happening. Sometimes, you wait. And you're glad you waited! As I reflect on my own development over the years, I'm much less concerned about being liked than I am about doing the right thing. The older I get, the better I get at doing what's hard. I know that I'm more confident in wanting to do the right thing. I ask myself that question several times a day.

JW: *What are some of your own habits or routines as an effective leader?*

JR: Thinking for me is a renewing and rejuvenating activity. I close my eyes, and I focus on the goal. There's something out there, something on the radar that might be a blur. Kind of like when you're driving closer and closer and the destination becomes clearer and clearer. The closer I get, the more I rest and reflect, I gain clarity. I have a two hour commute to and from my office, so that's where I let myself relax and think through the bigger issues we're facing.

JW: *How do you listen - and what do you listen for - so you hear more than what is just being said by those you lead?*

JR: Leaders rely on data. We want to be grounded in solid information, but sometimes all we have is our opinion. If you talk long and constructively enough, you think about it, you learn about it until you get to that point of clarity, you can relay what your intuition is telling you you're seeing. There's something called "Life Experience." As you go from profession to profession, reading, learning, talking, leading, you will have amassed knowledge. When you marry that experience with a perspective, you have to express yourself.

And that often includes looking at body language and not being afraid to call out what you're seeing. If someone seems closed or uncomfortable, for example, ask them about it. Inquiring builds a sense of trust as you're giving them permission to be real with you. Authenticity, demonstrated or felt, is part of the secret sauce of leadership.

JW: *How would you define your leadership philosophy in just one sentence?*

JR: Be fresh, different and on the edge of what's comfortable today to create the future.

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