

RICHARD: Collaboration. Almost all of us collaborate in our working life. Being part of a team means cooperating with other people on all kinds of projects.

ASHLEY: But the reality is few of us learn how to collaborate, and when a collaboration fails, it can leave such bad scars the people involved never want to work together again. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Today, we're bringing you another episode in our series on how businesses and nonprofits can help cut down on polarization. We hope to give you some ideas, things you might try in your workplace.

ASHLEY: In this episode, we speak with professor and collaboration expert Dr. Deb Mashek, author of the forthcoming book Collabor(hate): How to Build Incredible Collaborative Relationships at work even when you'd rather work alone.

RICHARD: Deb says if more of us learn some simple skills, disastrous collaborations can be avoided, and she should know. Deb's an expert on the psychology of human relationships and shares how she gained that expertise on her own journey from growing up in a trailer park to studying for a PhD. Here's our interview.

ASHLEY: Deb, I think most workers and employers recognize that collaboration and teamwork are a big part of their job. Are they good at it?

DEB: That's such a great question, and I think one of the things that's useful is to say, "What the heck do we mean by collaboration in the first place?" I see it on a lot of letterheads, like, "Hey, our company value is collaboration!" And few companies actually spend the time to define what that means and why it matters and, as a result, they fall short. So they're not particularly good at it. You're right. There's this general sense that it's a good thing, that it's something we should do, we believe is going to help make the world better, help our products be amazing, all that good stuff, but we don't actually invest in the expertise it takes or the talent it takes to be able to do it well.

So, as a result, despite high hopes and great visions heading out, what ends up happening is people start pulling in different directions, there's very little communication, even less follow-through, and then tension mounts, and projects fizzle, and good people walk away because we're not actually investing in helping our people do this essential skill well.

RICHARD: So just because you're collaborating a lot doesn't mean that this collaboration is productive or good, right?

DEB: Right, and for the book I wrote, I collected data from 1,100 people, and three-quarters of them said that they had been in a collaboration that was absolutely horrendous. That's a heck of a lot of pain going on. I also asked them, "Have you received any formal training on how to collaborate well, and a third of them said no.

RICHARD: Tell us more about the pain that's involved in going from collabor(hate) to collabor(great).

DEB: When people are feeling miserable in their workplace relationships and their collaborations, we know that their job satisfaction is in the gutter. We also know that their mental health is suffering. So

people who are feeling really yucky about these workplace relationships, they are having high levels of depression, high levels of anxiety, and they're thinking about leaving their jobs. So they're looking for ways of escaping the bad situation, which, of course, is not good for them. It's not good for their teams, their projects, and certainly not their organizations because that triggers everything from rehiring cost to instability to downtime on projects and things like that.

One of the people I interviewed for the book talked about the burn marks, that if you'd have a bad collaboration experience, it sticks with you. It's like this residue that you have to now overcome in order to put yourself out there again and to try engaging with a new collaborator. It takes a lot of trust, and the more bad experiences we have, the harder it is to get to the point where you're willing to do that, even for really good causes.

ASHLEY: Do you think that part of what can be difficult now, at least, with collaboration is that we're transitioning from a world, at least in the white-collar work world, where a lot of people have been working at home, speaking to each other over a screen, to now being back together in a workplace. Can that present problems?

DEB: The transition from in-person work to the Zoom world, I think that transition revealed a lot of fault lines that were already there, a lot of unhealthy practices, unhealthy relationships, poor structures for how we do, how we reward, how we celebrate our work, and so on. For me, it's kind of akin to closing time at the bar, where it's 2:00 a.m., and the bartender calls out, "Last call for alcohol," and the lights come on, and you realize how totally disgusting that bar was the entire time. It's just that there's now a harsh light being shined on these negative parts.

I think that's what happened with a lot of our collaborations when we first moved into the remote world. That said, the principles that make a collaboration amazing in person are the same ones that make a collaboration amazing virtually, hybrid-wise. So it's certainly possible to collaborate well without being in person, but we have to be intentional about all of these things. Then, to your point, what about now coming back into the workplace? So, now we're transitioning back, I think we're starting to see some bad habits revealed again.

RICHARD: Clearly, even with offices that have gone back, Zoom or video meetings play a part that they didn't before COVID. What kind of meetings should collaborators avoid online if they can do them in person?

DEB: I don't know that I have any meetings in that bucket, if I'm being totally honest. I think there are ways to have hard conversations over Zoom. There are ways to do incredible technology tools that enable brainstorming and whiteboard work and things like that that I used to think could only be done in person. I am no longer convinced that's the case. Therapy, for instance. I never thought you could do therapy over the internet, but now that... Those are hard conversations, and you can still form connection by structuring them well by thinking about how to bring technology in to support those conversations, as well.

I would rather be at a whiteboard doing brainstorming. I would rather, if I had to have a tough conversation and give negative feedback to someone or let someone go from a company, I would rather do that in person. That said, I think it is doable in a good way, through video-mediated communication, as well.

ASHLEY: Some of the issues that can come up when you're collaborating at work can arise because currently, we have something like four generations working together in the workplace, and people have different styles and ways of working and norms from when they first went into the workplace. So I'm just wondering, you know, how much can this be a hurdle to good collaboration.

DEB: There are so many differences that we're navigating in the workplace. You think about different generations, different functions within the organization, different cultures. It creates both incredible opportunities for rich collaboration because that's how you're going to be able to bring in diverse perspectives, diverse talents, diverse viewpoints, that if they can be held together and brought together, really amazing things can happen. That said, all of those differences also create hurdles to collaborating well and thus need to be navigated with a lot of intentionality.

ASHLEY: In your book, you give an example of a workplace where the CEO felt that there were some problems with performance and he needed to call them out, right? And at least one younger worker was accusing him of creating a hostile work environment, which I thought was a classic difference of opinion between, say, a manager in their 50s and somebody in their 20s or 30s.

DEB: The situation was a CEO who I interviewed, and we were talking about some of the challenges of collaboration, and he shared this ability, "We all need to be able to get feedback but also receive feedback and that he's found it increasingly difficult to give feedback to some of his younger staff who sometimes, not always, experience the feedback as a critique and not in a constructive critique way but creating, as you said, a hostile work environment. And the CEO said, "You know what? I have asked this person to do this thing," I think it was five times or something like that, "and it hasn't been done. So this is not me creating a hostile work environment. This is me holding you accountable in service to the goals of the organization."

RICHARD: Well, let's cut to the chase, Deb. You've had personal experience as a former college professor with dealing with young people. Is there a generational difference? Are a lot of people, young workers in their 20s, for instance, much more sensitive and see constructive criticism by a supervisor or a boss as somehow threatening to them personally?

DEB: That, to me, is an empirical question that I am curious about, but I can't say, "Oh, yeah. All of these young people are like this, and all of the older people are like this." I think that would be a disservice to everybody across the spectrum. I do think that the idea of receiving feedback is itself a muscle that we need to practice, both as, "How do we give feedback?" but also, "How do we receive feedback? But, again, I think that's an empirical question, and I am not familiar with the data. What have you heard? What data have we seen coming out on this?"

RICHARD: I'm not aware of data, but I am aware of personal experience, and I think that there might well be a difference in the way that younger generations of people sometimes respond to personal criticism. I think that we are living in an age of greater anxiety and maybe even sense of threat that perhaps earlier generations didn't experience as much. Now, I say "perhaps" because I don't know, but I kind of have a hunch.

DEB: And I think there's something really important in what you're saying, too, is that we know that when uncertainty is high, ambiguity is high, threat is high that people get, understandably, very self-protective, and they tend to turn inside and start thinking about, "Do I have the resources to deal with all of that? Do I feel equipped?" So that can totally trigger anxiety and self-protection. So then, for me,

the question that would pop up is: so how might we make those workplace conversations a place of safety and of not-threat while still being able to give the honest feedback that focuses on the quality of the work and that work's ability to advance our shared goals that we all need to get around and make sure, "Is this what we're actually trying to do together?"

ASHLEY: You're listening to Dr. Deb Mashek on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. We've been doing this podcast for well over two years now, and we'd really like to know what you think and what you'd like to hear. If there are some subjects that you want to hear more about or less about, please let us know. We have a link to our survey right on the podcast page of our website at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts.

ASHLEY: And by taking part, you're not just helping us. You're helping the environment, as well. Common Ground Committee has partnered with an organization called Ecologi -- that's Ecologi with an I at the end -- to increase biodiversity. Ecologi will plant five trees for every survey taken.

RICHARD: I've got to convince my relatives and friends to take the survey, then. So be part of making the show better and making the environment better at the same time. Again, the web address to give us your thoughts is commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts. Now back to our interview with Deb Mashek.

ASHLEY: We'd love to look at a couple of examples of how to go from dysfunctional collaboration to something that works better for everyone, you know, management, employees, as well as with outside organizations who you may be partnering with. If you have an example or two to share, that would be great.

DEB: Sure. One that comes to mind is talking to folks from a multinational manufacturing firm. One of the -- I think he was a director of manufacturing and production, and he shared that this new employee had come in and had been with the company for just a couple months and had decided, "I really cannot work with my direct supervisor. We are oil and water. This is miserable. Either he goes, or I go." And the director was like, "Wait, whoa, you're both talented, smart, kind, capable people. Why would I just boot somebody out?"

What he did, and I'll explain why this was so effective, but what he did was he was able to reassign the supervisor to another division for a while. It allowed the new person to settle in, to form some confidence within this new space, to form new relationships, and it gave them an opportunity, the two of them, to work together in a light way, so to not have their work completely yoked right out of the get-go when there was already this interpersonal friction. That created enough headspace for both of them to actually get to know the other person and to start liking the other person, and, eventually, the director brought the supervisor back into the same department as the new person, and they absolutely love working together. It goes splendid.

Why this works is that first step was actually decreasing the interdependence that the two of them had. I'm from Nebraska, so I like to use a good farm metaphor. What happened is it made it possible to decouple my wagon from those ill-mannered horses. So I don't suffer the consequences of that person's poor behavior even though, in this case, it wasn't that anyone was actually really behaving badly. It was just more the attributions were kicking up about the behaviors. Then they worked on getting to know each other and actually liking each other. So they increased their relationship quality, and at that point

they had the ingredients in place to go ahead and say, "Yeah, I trust you. I like you. I'm okay with the consequences that you have because I know you're doing good work."

RICHARD: You gave a great example, Deb, from manufacturing. Do you have one from another industry, perhaps a nonprofit, of how collaboration can go from being miserable to being really effective.

DEB: This one comes from a nonprofit where it was like a perfect storm. So you had a micromanaging director who was super passionate, obviously, about the mission of this organization, was the founding executive director. His fingerprints were all over every single inch of the organization. Then you had some new employees who were particularly young and who had a vision for the organization that, "We're going to be an anti-racist organization," which is a great idea, but the board of directors had a different vision for the organization, not to be a racist organization, certainly, but to say, like, "We are not first and foremost a DEI organization. First and foremost, we're this kind of an organization."

So the newcomers were working to kind of change what the organization was doing. The board of directors certainly said, "No, we need the organization to be what already exists. We've got all these documentations. We've been around for a long time. This is what we're about." So everyone's pretty miserable, frankly.

ASHLEY: So you were involved in trying to turn this around and have a better collaboration. What did that involve?

DEB: What we did there was work first on identifying roles and responsibilities but also thinking through: how can we pull apart the steps of the work and the process so that each participant, each player can add their value at the appropriate times? So we worked on clarifying roles and responsibilities, decoupling the work so that it was more of a sequential workflow versus, "You do this, then I'll do this, then I'll do this," so that they were in a position to work on their relationship quality.

We did this one with some off-sites for the whole team where there was so much downtime in the program so people could sit out on the patio, have conversations, break bread, really get to know each other as individuals with hopes and dreams and fears and anxieties and capacities and passions and talents and all of those things that then, they're just now at the level where they're ready to bring the dependencies back into place for the work to see if those really magical deep collaborations where people are able to contribute their unique value really in service to the shared mission to see if that can happen.

ASHLEY: Is there a job one that every potential collaborator should ask themselves before they begin?

DEB: For me, job one needs to be, "Why am I doing this now and with this person or with these people?" Not all collaboration is necessary. Collaboration is not the only tool out there. So we need to be able to say no, frankly, to more collaborations. We need to be pickier about what collaborations we're getting into. Job number one is to choose wisely.

RICHARD: Why are you passionate about this stuff, Deb? You're spending a lot of your time, nearly all of your working life now, on trying to make collaborations better. You've written a book. You're a consultant. What are some personal reasons why you've focused a lot of your career not only on collaborating but on relationships.

DEB: My background is as a relationship scientist. I literally have a PhD in the psychology of relationships, which is still baffling to me. And what I think through, what are my drivers? How did I get here? There are really three of them. I like to say that the trailer park, my parents' alcoholism, and my PhD were my three great teachers of collaboration. For example, I grew up in western Nebraska. I spent my formative years in a trailer park where the only two rules were -- well, what would happen is 8:00 in the morning or 9:00 in the morning, all of the kids would come out of their trailers with the absence of adult supervision.

The two real rules were: if anybody gets hurt, you go tell their parents, and number two, you can't cross over the boundary into the real road. There's a chain link fence, and you don't go past that. And other than that, the kids were really left to their own devices to have adventures, to create play, to figure out how to navigate interpersonal challenges like, "What game are we going to play? What are the rules going to be? Oh, my gosh, you violated a rule. How are we going to hold you accountable?"

And it might be, "Well, if you're going to be a jerk in the play area, then you're not welcome back, or we don't want to play with you." But this idea of free-range parenting, of letting kids tackle their own challenges in a way that gives them the opportunity to develop and exercise those muscles, is really critical.

RICHARD: So that's the first bit, is you grew up in a trailer park, which I'm sure a lot of people would think was a real negative, but in your case, it sounds like it was a real opportunity to pursue and become more sophisticated in how you relate to other people. What's the second reason why you've long been fascinated by human relationships.

DEB: I think the second one is my parents' alcoholism. They both struggled mightily with addiction for most of my life, and, as a lot of people who have addiction in their homes know, the adults are often unable, because they're dealing with their own stuff, to see and be responsive to the needs of the kids. So you get a bit of an inversion where the adults act like kids, and some of the kids take on very adultified behaviors.

That was the case with me, but of course I'm still a little kid who has needs, and a need for security, a need for comfort, those sorts of things. But I happened to be surrounded by so many other loving adults who were able and willing to provide for some of my needs. These were the parents of my friends. I remember in preschool, one of the teachers -- I remember her name was Karen -- took me home with her after preschool one day so that we could do crafts together, and she would make me dinner. It was a way that I was getting this care really early on, youth group leaders, teachers, all of these people who invested in a very communal way, in the wellbeing of this scrawny little kid with buck teeth who needed that and really thrived on it. So somehow I realized that it's through the power of relationships you can connect and also help you thrive in all of these ways that I am so grateful for.

ASHLEY: You mention your PhD in relationships. How did that play into what you do now?

DEB: Over the years, it's been now two and a half decades, I've studied everything from hooking up and breaking up and everything in between and have taught classes on the psychology of close relationships and the psychology of community building and the psychology of collaboration and then realized at some point that, oh, my gosh, all of this book knowledge actually has real-world applications that the world needs, so building collaborations, building communities, figuring out how to help

institutions to come together to leverage their respective resources and interests to make really amazing things happen.

How can you go back to the individual level and help people do that together on teams and certainly the teams that exist around our kitchen tables, too? So this collaboration stuff is not just about the workplace. It's about our faith communities, our families, our nonprofit engagements, how we invest ourselves to make the world better. If we can do that through collaboration, we're really able to unlock the potential of all the people involved.

ASHLEY: Thank you so much, Deb, for coming on Let's Find Common Ground with us.

DEB: My pleasure. Thanks for the conversation.

RICHARD: Ashley, I like the idea of employees working to get to know each other better. Deb mentioned off-site meetings that allow time for people to chat one-on-one, and that can be a great way to build trust and teamwork among colleagues of different ages, viewpoints, races, and social backgrounds.

ASHLEY: Yeah, and it would totally make sense that spending time with people just as human beings before you work together would improve relationships, and I think one thing that also really stuck out to me is, of course, her background and the free play part of the conversation. So she learned her social skills and relationship-building to begin with just hanging out with other kids during the day when she was growing up. I did that, too, especially during the summers. But when I look around today at the kids in my life, I think, for the most part, they've had very different childhoods. They've had less of that freedom to just hang out and learn those skills. So they're learning them, but they're learning those sort of problem-solving and relationship skills much later than, I'm guessing, you and I did.

RICHARD: Yeah, I do think that's a valid concern. I think kids do need more unstructured play, free-range play, as it were, to work things out themselves.

ASHLEY: Exactly. It just give you that basis for then going into college, potentially, and just adult life, where you're going to be dealing with other people all day, every day.

RICHARD: There's one other thing we wanted to mention about how we do this show or at least what you hear as a listener.

ASHLEY: At the end of each show, we have a little sound with a jingle that mentions The Democracy Group.

RICHARD: It's a podcast network that we're part of, 19 shows that cover a remarkable number of topics touching on democracy reform from polarization to gerrymandering, voting reform, racial justice, threats to democracy and more.

ASHLEY: Find out more at their website, democracygroup.org. And don't forget to go to our Common Ground Committee survey, let us know what you think, and have five trees planted as a result. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.