

TRANSCRIPT OF JUNE 21, 2017 #WORKTRENDS PODCAST
"LEAD BETTER, RESIST GENERATIONAL LABELS"
Edited for clarity

PATRICK ANTRIM: Welcome to another informative Talent Culture #WorkTrends live podcast and Twitter chat show. No, this isn't Megan Biro disguising her voice. My name is Patrick Antrim, and I'm subbing in for Megan as your WorkTrends host today while she attends the SHRM conference in New Orleans. So on behalf of Megan and the Talent Culture community, of which I'm a proud member, I want to thank all the partners and sponsors and extend Megan's gratitude and appreciation. So today I'm really excited about this show. It's on the topic of leadership, which is one of my favorite topics to talk about just because of the impact and relationship it has on company culture. So to put it into context, my background as a former New York Yankee gave me the inspiration to start thinking about life in business in new ways by using simple strategies to make big shifts and I spend a lot of time speaking and working with companies and their leaders talking about how culture and leadership intersect and to create either what I call, legendary teams, or how this intersection can ruin an organization. With me today to talk about leadership from the perspective of how to lead better by not placing generational stigmas on people, which by the way, is a great viewpoint, is Karl Bimshas. Karl Bimshas is a Boston-bred and California chilled advisor and writer. His San Diego-based firm, Karl Bimshas Consulting, focuses on existing strengths (I love that) and collaborates with busy professionals who run small businesses or large departments and want to manage better and lead. Well, Karl, welcome.

KARL BIMSHAS: Well, thank you, Patrick. Very happy to be here.

PATRICK: Yeah, it's certainly a pleasure to meet you and of course, discuss one of my favorite topics which is leadership, and I'm sure many of those that are lighting up the Twitter universe out there love leadership as well. So before we get started, I just wanted to give you an opportunity to talk about anything additional you'd like to tell our audience about yourself.

KARL: Well, just to build a little bit of context, I was a manager of Fortune 500 company for quite a while, had a good run there, then became a business development leader at a regional company, and then got the itch to go out on my own, and since 2009 I've been running my own leadership development and accountability firm. So I've got some leadership perspective and experiences from the boardroom to the kitchen table and everywhere in between. I'm looking forward to today's discussion.

PATRICK: It seems to me companies are really trying to find opportunities to really differentiate with these strategies. So let me open up with talking about what is it when you resist the temptation to label people based on their generation. How is that a great benefit to leadership in your perspective?

KARL: Well, you know when you see the social media feeds and all that, filled with, "How to deal with Millennials" or "the aging Boomers" or something like that? There's that little part of me, as somebody from Generation X, who has that stereotypical "annoyed by everybody getting the attention but me." But, that got me thinking over the years around how it really has nothing to do with the generation. Generational things are a label. It's shorthand that is to a certain extent marketing to be able to get some attention for the story that you're telling. I was reading a few articles today, that were talking about how to deal with particular Millennials, and it had nothing to do about a generational influence or the technology they're using. It's how to deal with 20-year-olds. Those are the types of things that I think we are using generational labels as a shorthand, as a shortcut. That's okay for some things, and you need those inputs if you're dealing with policy or dealing with millions of people. But when you're the leader or manager, and you're dealing with your work group, or your family or whatever size of your community is, that aggregate doesn't work. You've got to talk with people individually and get more into the individual because there are people who don't feel like they're part of the generational label that they're put in. People have different backgrounds and labels. Yes, people want to be part of a tribe, they want to belong, but nobody really likes being labeled something. If you are able to strip away labels, and generation is the big label, but that works up and down from race, to gender, to orientation, anything. If you can get rid of the labels and actually talk to the person, then you're going beyond the headlines, and I think that's what you need to do as leaders. Don't be just reading headlines you need to get in there and be a better practitioner one on one with people.

PATRICK: Right. And so are you seeing benefits. Is it sort of understanding more of the employee's stage in their life in terms of where they are because people can fall into that generation but have different things going on in their life? There's ways to uncover those clues, right?

KARL: Exactly. If you just stick with the label then you say, "well you don't know, you're a Boomer." Or, "you don't know." The problem with the labels is it's always the generation that's in, let's say in power, or the generation who's leading always thinks the generation below it doesn't know what they're doing, right? And the younger generations feel they are going to change the world no matter what. Well, that's more of a function of how people feel when they're in their 20s versus their 40s versus their 60s. It doesn't have to do with the generational trend. I think that the benefits are, if you can figure out what somebody in their 20s is going through and how they generally think and feel, you know, because people in their 20s, their aspirations and goals are the same in this year as they were in the 1970s as they were in the 1950s. There's different technology, but there's still certain aspirations. They're predictable, and there's a sense of, "I'm awesome, and the world is horrible, and I'm going to go fix the world," when you're in your 20s. And then that changes over time. I think if we spend more time looking at where people are in stage of life then we're cutting through some of the noise and becoming a better leader because we're actually being more personal to people.

PATRICK: It's great. When you study success over the years, with all the millions of words that are in our dictionary, in our library of words to use, there's only a few words, if you study those that are successful over time, and they come down to hard work, dedication, focus, trust, integrity, things like that. It's really interesting to understand these different trends in their stages in life. So tell me, why is it important to give immediate feedback. Do you think that's important today?

KARL:

Depending on either where someone is in their stage, yeah, absolutely! I think feedback, not just at work but everywhere, is essential. And why you should do it? Immediate feedback should be, to my mind, it should be fast, it should be frequent, it should be relevant, and it should generally be positive. I think what happens with feedback is that people tend to hold on to it, and what happens is that if it's positive, it dilutes over time. And if it's negative feedback, or if it's acidic, it corrodes over time. But holding feedback back doesn't help. It's much better if you're using it right then and there. The closer to the event the better. You think about organizations that are involved in quarterly recognition or things like that, and the recognition is great, but you're recognizing somebody for something that they did potentially three months ago. There's a vacuum in time. Time creates the vacuum. So, if somebody does something and you're not giving them feedback, either praising the progress, or making some modifications, or trying to redirect them in the direction that you want, whether the feedback is positive or negative feedback, if you're waiting on it, people are going to fill the vacuum with their own story. You don't want that. When you're leading and managing you want to do something Ken Blanchard has said a lot. Praise progress and reward things that are approximately right. People aren't going to get perfection right off the bat. But if you're not providing any feedback, you're allowing too much space for them to create their own story, which could be, they think they're the greatest in the world. But you didn't tell them that they needed to do something different. Or they could be thinking, they're horrible. "I don't know; they don't talk to me at all. I don't know what I'm doing." And you could have been pleased with them. So always act on your feedback, would be my point. I think if you sit on it, it dilutes it and it loses its power and its effectiveness.

PATRICK:

Do you think there are reasons why people hesitate to be candid in that feedback? Say it's an opportunity to coach develop and bring that person to the next level, are you seeing trends with leaders who are afraid from a compliance point of view, to lead? What do you think in terms of why people resist from giving feedback?

KARL:

I don't know that I'm seeing a trend in it. I think it's again, partly on the person who's giving the feedback and their viewpoint. There are those who think, 'well you're just supposed to do your job. What, am I going to throw a parade if you tie your shoes correctly?' It's a 'you do what you do, and you only get rewards and feedback if it's extra special, above and beyond, or if you've really screwed up or something' attitude. It's the mindset of the person supplying the feedback. I think you've got to be, as a leader, a little bit more well-rounded and remember that the feedback isn't for you, it's for the people who are helping you to reach your goals, your teammates. Feedback is like a gift, like a Christmas sweater that you get from your crazy aunt or something. You can either accept it, or you can be one of those jerky people and say, "I'll never wear this." But the right thing to do is say, thank you and then decide what you're alright with. I think it's a two-way street. That's why it's feedback. You've got to be able to deliver it effectively so that you're getting the results that you're aiming for. But you also have to be receptive to feedback and say, 'well gee, is this true or should I be ignoring this feedback because the person who's giving it to me hasn't proven any credibility' or whatever it might be. But I'm not seeing a trend. I think the answer is, people don't like conflict as a general rule. They're afraid of, depending upon how restricted their environment is, if it's even something they should give feedback on, or they should they figure it out themselves. I think it's mostly fear. People aren't providing feedback because they're afraid of something.

PATRICK:

Sure. And sometimes that comes with assuming and making assumptions. Are there ways leaders can turn the assumption into empathy? Sort of reflect on their own behaviors to improve the leader's own personal leadership instead of trying to change others.

KARL:

Yeah absolutely. I think that assumptions are A.B.T. With assumptions you should Always Be Testing. Generally, we think our assumptions are right, but as human beings, our assumptions usually don't pan out too well. I did an exercise a few years ago. I think it was inspired from Seth Godin, where you keep a journal of your assumptions for 90 days, and then go back and see how many of them had come true versus not. It's a great exercise to do and build a discipline. You just make note of some assumptions and see how it pans out over time. You'll see that you're not nearly as right as often as you as you think you are. In terms of turning assumptions into empathy, it's there if you test it. There's that kind of core attribute of a good leader's curiosity. So you may have an assumption; let's turn it into a hypothesis and see if it's true or not. By doing that you're creating some empathy because you're asking, you're listening; you're looking to learn. That in itself is going to be a way of changing any assumptions that you have instead of trying to have a follower do what you want them to do. If you're in there listening to them, and probing, and finding their strengths, you're going to have more success because then you can leverage the strengths to where you want to go.

PATRICK:

Right and this whole generational label begins with sometimes these assumptions. So tell me what do you think or describe what a leadership agenda means to you.

KARL: So leadership agendas are a tool that I use with people. If you just think of an agenda for a staff meeting or any meeting, hopefully, you have one. Hopefully, it's not hidden. You lay out what it is that you want to achieve. As the manager or leader, you should be questioning what your objective is and asking yourself, okay what kind of leader do I want to be, or do I need to be, in this culture at this place and this time? And asking yourself, how do I want to lead? By just asking that question you start to create a little bit of an agenda. The leadership agenda is how you plan on guiding your organization or your team over the next, fill in the time frame, next month, 90 days, year, whatever it might be. "These are the things, this is how I want to lead, this is the tools I'm going to use." I break it down into three elements; your attitude, your appearance, and your approach. The attitude is your inner game. What are your beliefs, your values, your compass? What's your true north? So that's your leadership attitude. Then the appearance is your outer game. It's how you show up and how you present yourself. It's the grooming and speaking, and all that, but it's also how present are you? How mindful are you from a leadership appearance standpoint? Are you taking initiative? And then approach, which is basically your behavior and how you're treating others. So for an effective leadership agenda, you know yourself, where you are going, how you want to lead, and you're keeping those three things aligned.

PATRICK: That's great. So mentorship. This happens to be one way to learn this. I know those are some great ways to shift, but what do you think ... taking people to the next level in that coaching managing process?

KARL: So you're asking about how to find the right mentor or get there through mentorship?

PATRICK: Well in order to develop this investment in others, to get leaders to make attitude shifts it takes time and commitment. I know you talked about being curious and working through the process. How important has that been for you having mentors.? Are you just naturally curious?

KARL: Well, probably naturally curious. Many mentorships are crucial, but I think sometimes we put too much cache on it in terms of, who's the right one. You can have a lousy mentor and learn an awful lot. You can learn a lot from a lousy leader. So it will change over time?

PATRICK: Exactly.

KARL:

There is a whole world of mentorship and how to “do it right” and finding “the right people” and all that, versus a paid coach, or apprenticeship, or something else. I think the key for finding the mentor is in where you want to go. Be focused on, let's say at the mid-range goal, as opposed to a long-term goal. Mentoring sometimes takes a longer view. But for me, it's just like, how you dress for success, how you dress for the job that you want and that whole adage. If you think about the corporate ladder, even if it's lateral, dress for the job that you want. Similarly, you need to think about learning from people who are in the job that you want. So if you're an entry level person, instead of trying to get the ear of the CEO or someone like that, maybe try to find a peer to your supervisor. I think the key is finding the people who are either going through, or just recently went through, what you want to do next because you're going to get fresher, truer, real feedback from them and their experience as to what's going on, and what they had to do, and what they've gone through. When too much time passes, they kind of get a little bit of the gravitas, and they clean up the history a little bit, and they maybe forget some details that would have been important to know. So even if you're aspiring to get a particular type of car or something like that, go find the people who just bought that car and learn from them. “What did you have to do?” “Where did you find it?” “What's a good deal?” Just as with leadership, it depends on what you're looking to work on, but I think ultimately, there's your skills; they're what got you there. Then there's what H.R. tends to call the soft skills. I call them essential leadership skills, which are all the interpersonal skills, communication, influence, situational awareness, problem-solving, general professional acumen, all the things that if you screw up, it generally is what gets you into the H.R. office. Or a “let's talk” meeting. Those are the things people ought to be working on. So you want to find mentors, not a positional mentorship, but people who just get it. If you're looking for mentorship, figure out which one of those essential leadership skills would you like to focus on over the next six months, and find people who you admire. “You seem to understand body language real well,” or “you're great at presentations,” or “you're great at, whatever,” rather than, “Hey how'd you get to be VP?” or “how did you get that position?” Think more about the skills that they possess, that way we're breaking down that it's not a positional thing. It's more like, “okay, what are the skills I want to learn from the best?” and “who are the best in my circle?” “Who's doing that?” So I think you're right.

PATRICK:

Karl, are there specific, for people in leadership, they want to improve their interaction with their direct reports or even within their organization, attitude shifts or skill sets that they can develop?

KARL: Yeah there's tons, but I think there's a couple --

PATRICK: Where do we begin?

KARL: So you're saying like an attitude shift, and they want to be improving? So they're fairly typical, but we tend to forget about them. One is empathy. If you understand what people are going through and are showing empathy, or being there and just listening to them, than you're showing that you're listening, which is automatically a better leadership skill than some people have. This is where you can go from stage of life. If you're somebody in your 40s or 50s, you know what people in their 20s and 30s and early 40s have gone through, so you already have some basic empathy. "Oh, I remember that." You can share some stories and be there for them and try to build some empathy there. So I think empathy is a big part of it.

PATRICK: Why do some people forget where they started and where their career originated from? They lose touch of that empathy with their teams.

KARL: Yeah absolutely. And I think that's sort of related. People forget because as you advance and get into the rhythm of things, things change. As you get known as the leader, become the leader, there tends to be a little deferential treatment to you one way or another. Whether you're leading the family or leading the little league team or the corporation. there tends to be some perks and some things that you get used to. You then begin to think, "well, gee, since I'm experiencing this, everybody's experiencing this." I think then it's time for the other attitude shift, gratitude. It's where you realize all of this, took time to get, all of it could potentially go away.

PATRICK: Right.

KARL: That's the stoic in me. It could go away, so you should show some gratitude. That would be the other part because people forget. You've got to be, as a leader, you've got to be able to teach because not everybody knows or gets your vision as a leader. You've got to be able to teach them your vision. Not everybody gets your passion. You've got to be able to express and show and your passion. Not everybody gets or can match your level of action or see how often you're achieving the things that you're achieving. So that's where being able to teach as a leader, is an important attitude. As opposed to, "people should just get this. I don't know why people don't get this right." You shouldn't be punishing people who don't anticipate your whim.

PATRICK: I don't know if they took a different process usually to get there sometimes.

KARL: That's where it links back to curiosity. Now not all of this works, say in a manufacturing setting, or where certain things have to be a certain way, but most of our life is flexible. There's patterns. So the curiosity, back to that attribute, would be, "Huh. How do you get there?" "Well, that seems better." or "Okay, that's great, but here's an unintended consequence down the line that we should look at." I think if you have that curiosity then you want to know what's the other path that people took instead of demanding, this is the way you've got to go.

PATRICK: Right, that teaching approach. I mean people feel good when somebody is stopping, pausing, being empathetic and also understanding their perspective of the world and taking their time as a leader. It means a lot to people, would you agree, that when their supervisors spend the time to coach and teach and relate to and show interest in them?

KARL: Yeah, because ultimately, everybody wants to feel that they matter. Now it might be that people have a difference of opinion. Some people don't want public recognition. They would just as soon you send them a plaque, or the money, or vacation, or something like that. "I don't need these accolades in front of in front of everybody." But it still shows that what you did matters. Fundamentally people are motivated by; increasing their relationships with people they like, working on something bigger than themselves, or leaving some type of legacy. When they get that validation, or that permission, for lack of a better word, from leaders, they feel better and they're going to put it effort regardless of what stage of life they're in, or what generation they are a part of. People being listened to and making a difference is one of the better motivational tools.

PATRICK: Affects their confidence too right?

KARL: Absolutely yeah.

PATRICK: So tell me, where do you begin? Tell me about where you began in this process? I'm curious.

KARL: Where I began?

PATRICK: How you began. Fortune 500?

KARL: Well, I'm not entirely sure how to answer that. I'd say I've always been interested in getting better and improving things, so there's a little bit of that perfectionist, but realizing that you're not going to be able to achieve perfection. I used to listen to my dad's old tapes, Earl Nightingale and Dennis Waitley, and all the other old gurus. I used, here's a generational thing, I used to listen to those tapes over and over until they wore down.

PATRICK: Yeah. What do you mean tapes?

KARL: So that kind of formed a baseline. In terms of being involved in some of the other companies ... I could talk forever, so I'm trying to edit. I don't know where to go. I think there's always been a thirst. There's that leadership part, and that's where I was thinking like people who manage or lead, it's not necessarily a particularly easy job, but people who enjoy it, who are in it, can't imagine doing anything but it. When they're not in it, they're not as happy. So even though there's things that managers together will moan and groan about, "Why can't people do this..." or "Why doesn't that happen?" but they love the challenge. I have found, in terms of working with people and doing leadership things and all that, I love working with people and those challenges and the problems that arise. I'm a little sick like that. I like the problems that people bring and working on that and solving that. I've always enjoyed that. That's that's kind of where that comes from I guess.

PATRICK: In getting to see people develop, I mean being a developer of when you're really developing a business or producing products or services, and the people are what make all of that happen, so it's exciting to get out there and see change. Well, I'll tell you, Karl, this was a lot of fun to share the time. I enjoyed being the host today and I want to make sure that you have an opportunity to tell the audience (that Twitter universe is lighting up we've got a lot of great conversations happening there and I want to make sure that we all get the opportunity to ask the questions and get involved in the show after) so tell me Karl, do you have any lingering thoughts that you want to leave our audience with at this time?

KARL: I guess it would just be; you touched on it a little bit. When you're in management and leadership, and you really like it, sometimes you tend to read every book, go to every seminar, and generally almost become a little bit of a leadership junkie where you're taking everything in and reading everything. And while I think that's great. I'd love people to buy everybody's stuff. I think sometimes ... I'm more impressed with somebody who reads one book ten times, than somebody who reads ten books, because I think if you can really get into something and work on something. You've got to be able to not just be book smart, but get out there and learn and make mistakes. Learn how to apologize and learn how to fix things. I think that those who are in leadership positions and can't quite muster that should be thinking about individual contributor positions, You can have a great career being an individual contributor and not be messing up people's lives. I think as a leader you should always be finding ways to manage better and always ways to lead well. And I guess that's that's where I would leave it.

PATRICK: All right thank you, Karl. Let's head on over Twitter. Join the conversation.

KARL: Sounds great. Looking forward to it. Thanks so much.

PATRICK: All right. Take care.