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The best leaders cultivate empathy, patience and an awareness of their own vulnerabilities, says Nancy F. Koehn, a historian at the Harvard Business School. She's the author of *Forged in Crisis: The Power of Courageous Leadership in Turbulent Times*, about the zigzagging paths of five historical figures, from Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass to environmentalist Rachel Carson. In this episode, Koehn speaks with Stanford Professor Bob Sutton about how transformational leaders slow down and harness their humanity to overcome significant challenges.



Transcript

- If you had a magic wand and could change things about modern leaders, what would you pick? - Pry 'em open and make 'em come face to face right up close and personal with their own vulnerability.. - Friction is huge psychological burden.. - Without friction we would not have fire and we would not have sparks.. - I gotta get a knife (laughing).. I gotta hide it.. - They end up spending a lot of time ruminating.. (upbeat music) - Hi, I'm Bob Sutton, I'm an organizational psychologist and Stanford professor and this is the Friction podcast.. (mellow music) On today's episode, we're joined by Nancy Kane.. She's a Harvard Business School professor, a historian, and most important for today, she's author of *Forged in Crisis*.. This wonderful book tells the story of five famous leaders who showed extreme courage and persistence in difficult times..

We invited Nancy to the podcast because she has such a fresh perspective on power and strength.. Nancy's work shows how many of our most prized leaders, leaders who've led nations and groups through the most difficult times, draw clarity, strength, and magnetism from their own vulnerability and emotional awareness.. How do you define friction? What are some of the emotional connotations for you? - So I think of friction as a combination of volatility and uncertainty, certainly, unexpected complexity, the ambiguity that goes with it, and in the book, each of the people in this book finds themselves guilty of and surrounded by lots of friction.. And then, in the midst of that and in the midst of the high waves and the fast winds of the storms of crisis, they figure out how to dial that down by making themselves thoughtful, resilient, broad-looking, and emotionally aware and forbearing individuals in all that and guess what? The friction around them declines and their effectiveness in achieving a mission increases.. - So I love that definition, that's just eloquent and beautiful.. Now I want to move to a definition you put in the book, this is by David Foster Wallace who I never thought as a management theorist.. (laughing) I thought he was the author of *Infinite Jest*.. - Right, the definition which I literally cut and pasted from an article he wrote for *Rolling Stone* many years ago (laughing) a non-fiction article he wrote for *Rolling Stone* called *Up Simba* in which he following on the campaign bus, John McCain around during his first presidential run and he gets riffing.. Wallace is a guy who riffs, a writer who riffs.. - Right..

- He's riffing on leadership and he says real leaders are individuals who help us overcome the limitations of our own weaknesses and selfishness and laziness and fears and get us to do harder, better things than we can get ourselves to do on our own.. And I read this and just it like, hit me like a ton of bricks.. I'm like, that's a leader, right there, unlocking their pushing us beyond what we think we're capable of and all kinds of things are possible when that happens so I just stole that with lots of good footnotes and then started really digging into as I thought about the people and their emotional growth and forging in these stories.. - There's lots of examples in the book where making things harder to do, slowing down are better, so what are the up sides of friction and how does it help your courageous leaders and their followers? - So I think Fredrick Douglass understood the answer to that question very, very well, right? He understood how extraordinarily embedded for example, slavery was and the moral and political and social and psychological negative consequences that flowed from that in the face of all kinds of economic benefits for certain stakeholders.. But what he did with the friction that he encountered around slavery was to acknowledge it, name it, right, to talk about those who want progress without the mighty roar, right, of protest and activism want the ocean without the waves.. You can't embrace a mighty cause without also acknowledging and using the friction around that cause you can't do it without the leader and the people around him, framing the stakes of that friction, understanding what's good, what's bad and what are the trade-offs.. That friction can be incredibly useful, incredibly important to helping the leader make his or her case for that mission and then in some cases mobilizing people around the

friction to help achieve it.. (upbeat music) As they delve deeper and deeper into what they're tryin' to do and how difficult it's gonna be and by the way how satisfying, right, some of that difficulty is in itself, is I'm not just doing this for my narcissistic bing, bing, right? This isn't just ka-ching, ka-ching on the narcissistic meter.. There are other people that I can serve and make stronger or move forward the boulder of goodness and that bridge from I to thou or I to we.. - I to thou..

- Is really important.. - Actually, what it reminded me of was one of my colleagues Frank Flynn has done research on how often the most effective leaders and the leaders who suffer the most are the ones who feel really guilty and are constantly worried about other people and the degree to which that was the theme throughout the book just amazed me.. - Yeah, it's all over the book.. And I think, I think that the reason it's all over the book is because really effective leaders have to be able to motivate others, including their enemies, including the obstacles in their path.. And they have to have cultivate a sense of empathy and then access that and use that to navigate round their enemies or over their enemies and to bring their followers together in some kind of cohesive, we hopefully highly functioning group.. That's critical for Lincoln's cabinet and his generals.. That's critical for Shackleton keeping the crew alive.. It's critical for Rachel Carson as she's trying just like so many of the folks you work with.. The diaspora of high-tech folks, she is a diaspora of scientists and--- - Ah, it's amazing.. - And biologists, and you know, fisherman and all kinds of people, she needs information from, she needs advice from and if she can't reach into herself and try and understand these folks, she can't really move forward her mission, which is not the Petri dish or the incubator of a new company, but it's the incubator for an astoundingly important theory of environmental inter-connectingness and sustainability that's gonna launch the modern environmental movement..

So, how do you as a young CEO or young COO, how do you understand and feel for and use that ability to connect with a piece of yourself and relate it to what other people are going through, stand in another's shoes to really, not only do what you wanna do, but help make your mission or the mission of the start-up, the mission that is identified and aligned with the people that are gonna push it forward.. 'Cause you can't do it alone.. And maybe that's the most important thing that these people realize.. They can't do it alone and there are no superman in vacuo successes and so they have to be able to really manage the energy of their folks and that means acting from a great sense of effective, credible empathy.. - Yeah, so I love the effective incredible empathy and it does dove-tail with one of at least my motto's is that innovation is a social process and so is change and it isn't just the leaders.. I was completely struck, social network theorists would call this brokers, Rachel Carson's ability to weave together people from remarkably diverse networks, their ideas to do sort of knowledge brokering to essentially both develop a strong taste for what she was doing and to create legitimacy for what she was doing given how little she had to start with was absolutely striking.. I was just astounded by it.. - I never thought of it that way, that is a brilliant analysis of what she did.. (upbeat music) To think of Lincoln's second inaugural, this is the speech he gives with the ending that we all know so well.. He delivers it on March 4th, 1865..

The war's just about finished, unbelievable blood shed, talk about toxicity and decisiveness and you know, blaming the other.. I mean, America's situation today is a mild, a much milder version of what the country under went then and Lincoln writes, at the very end of this speech with malice towards none, with charity toward all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in.. To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan to do all that we can to cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.. So what's he doin' there? He's calling Americans to the better angels of their nature.. He's saying let's transcend this.. It is our war not the South's war, not the North's war and we are to move beyond it now without vindictiveness and with forgiveness and so that is Lincoln asking, exhorting, inspiring people to do better, harder things than their first instinct, than their first emotion, than their first wish to lash out would dictate.. - This notion of slowing down and thinking about doing the right thing rather than going with your worst, first impulse is something that I see throughout the book.. And it's really striking, as you say, given the temptations of social media and instant gratification how striking it is the power of sitting and thinking and also not doing things.. One of the main bits of advice we've learned from studying start-ups is, actually comes from research on medical decision making, which is sometimes the best advice, is don't just do something.. Stand there and think about what the heck you really should do instead of going with your gut reaction..

- I think you nailed it, right? I'm talking to my MBA students about this in an authentic leadership course I'm teaching in the second year right now, which is how do leaders use the written word and particularly I think writing in long-hand, not necessarily typing on our phones, 'cause we think differently research is beginning to demonstrate, a little bit more creatively, a little bit more fungibly and more effective in an exploratory vein when we write with long-hand, how do leaders use writing, even just for themselves to parse out, their next move, their thoughts, their possibilities, how to get stuff done.. And for Lincoln, what should I do about the war? I mean, he writes these kind of notes to self.. Carson and her letters to friends.. All these people are trying to figure stuff out.. Sometimes only they can parse out and the written word turns out to be really helpful 'cause it teaches us to think.. - So you make this interesting claim, this notion that leaders are made not born and one thing I like about the book that's beautiful is how for each of the five leaders you go through their childhood and early experiences.. Tell us a little bit more about what made them develop this ability to persevere and to inspire and protect others.. - The first is a commitment that they discover or access relatively early on.. Not from birth, you know, these people aren't sprung from the river Zeus saying, hey forge me into something better.. (laughing) But you know, each of them at different moments in the first kind of third of their life, say I can get better..

You know, Lincoln wants to rise politically and from that comes another piece that I think is attached and that is that they also realize usually after they stumble, they fall down or something, friction or some kind of untoward, unexpected result from

that occurs for them, that they can learn something about themselves that will be highly useful.. That they can learn it and then hone it.. So Carson learns early on, the power of what I call gathering years when nothing is happening on her bucket list but she's soaking stuff in and saying, "Hmm, I might use that later.. "I can learn from this person, I can learn "from this particular scientific possibility." So she's like a squirrel like gathering these nuts about herself that she can use without having to kind of see the results immediately.. The first thing is I can make myself better.. Not just better on the external achievement list.. Better from the inside out and we don't teach this at the business school's.. So we're not teaching this at Harvard and we need to be.. - Sure.. - So that is something that really came through to me..

I had no idea that these, in some cases, someone as iconic as Lincoln or iconic as Fredrick Douglass, I had no idea how they had these moments when they were just ready to pack it all in, right? Every leader knows that we all meet these moments when we just don't know what to do next and we're ready to consider giving up.. And yet, if the leader gives up at those moments, the whole damn thing comes crashing down.. So, this idea that just the next small step, no matter how small and no matter how confused the leader is when he or she makes it is huge.. You can't always see how important it is at the moment but historians get paid to look backwards and understand this.. So, this is really important for leaders today, aspiring, established and those that just wanna get bigger and more luminous and more decent in what they're doing.. To understand that the next step, no matter how small, is sometimes the whole damn game.. (upbeat music) The essence of these stories is ultimately about emotional awareness.. They were all born intelligent, they all had good hard drives but it turns out that when the stakes are high and turbulence is all around and things don't always go according to plan, what will help you navigate, what will make you stronger, what will bring other people along with you, actually isn't a revert to the spreadsheet.. It's not that that doesn't matter, it's just that that is no longer sufficient by any, any means and it certainly in times of volatility when the waves are high, not gonna get people to do harder, better things than they can get themselves to do on their own.. These people forge themselves and their missions and other people into better versions of themselves largely because they discovered, right, that emotional tools and particularly discipline and awareness are so useful and vital to getting hard stuff done when the volatility meter goes up..

So that's the first thing.. The second thing is that one of the things I've learned coaching executives, so I'm teaching emotional awareness to MBAs for the first time right now.. It's absolutely compelling.. One really interesting doorway in is describe your worst people nightmare that you've ever had.. (laughing) - That's brilliant.. - Then describe with the left side of your brain what it cost you.. Right, so you link the numbers and the balance sheet and the highly developed part of their hard drive there with the messiness and the humanity and the complexity of building teams, keeping them going when someone stumbles or they turn toxic or the doubting Thomas gets contagious or whatever.. And then they can suddenly go, hmm that's interesting.. I didn't really necessarily have the app for that.. And so then you get people really interested often retrospectively but then they use that interest to open the door proactively or going forward which is, hmm what do I need to know about myself to help me be a better kind of leader of my folks? To deal with what we call, think of the language here, the softer side of business, which ultimately turns out in lots of critical moments to be the whole enchilada..

Not necessarily--- - Or the harder part.. - Really not necessarily for the whole duration of the enterprise, but an enterprise can live or die based in some moments on the shoot if you will, it's going through of its people and the challenges of that.. And so, I've had great success coaching people with that doorway.. - Part of this, and it's fascinating, you're teaching courses on authentic leadership right now, one of the things that struck me was, I'm not an expert on stoicism or anything but the degree to which, throughout the book you had these leaders who would disguise and hide their fears, they would be depressed but would put on like a happy act, and sometimes, in the case of Lincoln, they'd even lie, so on the one hand, you know, we've got like emotional intelligence and all that stuff and the other hand we have authentic leadership.. But some of the things that these folks did, did not fit my definition of authentic leadership so maybe you can help me here.. - It's a great question and I define authentic leadership as people who have their mission and their actions aligned with their deepest values.. Now that is true of every person in this book.. And so, how do you make sense of say Lincoln not walking out when he was, you know, ready to kill himself, which he said he was at several points during the presidency 'cause he was so despairing about the military fortunes of the North.. How do you square that with someone who would square his shoulders and walk out and try and look confident on the streets of Washington? And the way you square that is to say, Lincoln had his doubts and he had his fears and he wrote about them, he shared them with close confidants, but he would say to you as he said to some Senators, do you think it helps anyone if I walk out right now before my generals, before my citizens and look like I believe the entire war is lost? I will actually increase the chances that the war is lost and the great suffering that ensues increases if I do that.. So these are people who understood that alignment with your mission and staying true to your mission involves leading yourself from that place and that's what they did..

It's not that they tried to obfuscate or ignore their own difficulties or the difficulties of what they were doing.. It's that they always believed that their forbearance was a tool they could use, even while they cultivated emotional honesty.. Emotional honesty and authenticity are not exactly the same as how we show up.. - So with that in mind, if you had a magic wand and could change things about modern leaders what would you pick? So you just get one.. - Pry 'em open and make 'em come face to face, right up close and personal with their own vulnerability.. - Ooh, I love that and that's both, you've gotta work on them to be stronger and also one thing that runs throughout your book is finding the people who can offset your vulnerabilities to work with you.. Think of Lincoln's famous cabinet, sort of like the team of rivals.. They had offsetting skills, just astounding.. - But we can't do that until we know what are vulnerabilities are, right? And then compensate for them as you point out.. (upbeat music) - So Nancy, it's been a delight to talk to you..

She is the author of Forged in Crisis.. A book I recommend that you read.. Thank you so much Nancy.. - Thank you for having me, it's a great pleasure.. (upbeat music) - The one thing that I hope you will take away from Nancy is the importance of slowing down and processing your emotions.. Leaders who want to move through extreme challenges have to face their emotions and the emotions of those they lead head on.. Please spread the word about The Friction podcast.. Rate and review us on iTunes and share your favorite episodes with your colleagues, your family, and even your therapist.. On the next episode, we'll be joined by Eric Reese.. Eric is renowned for sparking the lean start-up movement..

Eric's going to talk about bringing an entrepreneurial mindset to large organizations.. We can't do this without you.. Tell us what's driving you crazy and what are you doing to make life better in your organization for yourself and for the people that you work with.. Please send us your Friction stories, tips and tricks.. We'd love to hear from you via Twitter @ecorner or please send us an email at stvp-ecorner@Stanford.edu.. And now for the final tangent.. - Shackleton, right, on the, stranded on the iceberg.. His ship goes down in 1915.. He's got 27 men and you know, three lifeboats and no ways and no text messages and no Facebook posts and no one knows where he is and he's gotta somehow keep these men alive.. And with very few resources and what he is able to do is to keep on, if you will, strengthening his own muscles of conviction and courage and then to use that to help instill in the men their own sense, literally contagious from him, that they can do this..

That they can keep on keepin' on.. That they can stay cohesive as a unit 'cause a big piece of the story is the fact that the Lord of the Flies syndrome doesn't take hold.. I mean, they hang in their together.. It makes a huge difference and years later when the survivors from it and they all survived, when the people were looking back on the voyage on how they lived, they all said the boss made us believe that we could do it.. (upbeat music) - The Friction podcast is a Stanford ecorner original series brought to you by Stanford Technology Ventures Program and Designing Organizational Change.. Friction is produced by Rachel Julkowski and Ali Rico, Jake Smith and Stife Studios are our editor and audio engineers.. Susie Allen and Victoria Johnson are our writing and marketing team.. Danielle Steussy is our designer and digital products manager and I'm Bob Sutton.. Thanks for joining us.. This is The Friction podcast...