

Shit We Don't Talk About Podcast
Episode 82
Loren Sanders
Empathy is NOT a weakness

Mia Voss 00:04

Hey, welcome to the latest episode of Shit We Don't Talk About, the podcast that takes on topics that need more open and honest discussion, which means some of these topics are triggering. So please take care when listening. And I'll always give you a trigger warning. For instance, here's one. Every episode contains swear words, you've been warned. Make sure to check out the show notes which include an accessibility transcript of the podcast and all of the links for our guests at ShitWeDontTalkAboutpodcast.com

Mia Voss 00:45

My guest today is Loren Sanders, author of the book empathy is not a weakness. In this episode, we discussed the concept of using empathy to be a better leader. Sounds like an oxymoron, right? But as Loren points out, companies in which people feel seen and heard tend to be highly successful. Go figure. As usual, we dive deep on this one, so tune in, it gets good. Here we go.

Mia Voss 01:09

Hi, Loren. I'm excited to talk to you. So folks, as you may have heard me say in the intro, so Loren is from my hometown and then she wrote this book I'm holding it up even though it sound only right now. Empathy is not a weakness and Other Stories from the edge. We're gonna dive into that because it is definitely something we did shoot we it shipped we talked about, but not in the right way. Right?

Loren Sanders 01:39

Agree. 100%.

Mia Voss 01:42

So I love that one way we're going to start into this is the why now on this book, because it is being discussed. I think also people get empathy and empathic mixed up, don't you think? An Empath and empathic mixed up? Agree?

Loren Sanders 01:58

There's a lot of stuff to unpack there, though. The Why did I write the book is because there's a message that needs to be out and it needs to be out now. Why now is because I keep on coming across things that say, leaders need to be more empathetic. People need to be more empathetic, everybody needs to be more empathetic. And there's research out there showing things like four and seven CEOs think that they are more empathetic post COVID dot dot dot one in six employees agrees that staggering to me, I think that's from business over trying to remember where all my stats are coming from other things like 68% of CEOs fear that they'll be seen as weak, if they are empathetic. Those are the reasons why we need to talk about this now. And the reasons why we need to talk about how empathy isn't a weakness, it's actually a superpower.

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Loren Sanders 02:57

And nobody is telling people how to do it. And my book really tells you here's a framework. And I know it works because I used to be a terrible person. And it worked for me,

Mia Voss 03:08

a terrible person in leadership, I want to be clear on that. And this is what I wanted to point out as well, too. So currently you are you're running in the leadership world, tell us what your title is.

Loren Sanders 03:20

I am actually a senior manager of learning development and performance at a fortune four company,

Loren Sanders 03:28

which I

Mia Voss 03:28

love to so you know, Lauren's been steeped in this. And when you read the book, and I'll put all the links in here in the show notes as well to your speaking from experience, like you said, of being a terrible person and reading the book, this is what I love to you really do break down of like, here's what I thought, ego obviously comes into this a ton. And I mentioned to you before we started recording that I've been in, you know, I've been out of the corporate world for quite a long time. And on my on my own. I would love to be as I like to tell people, I would love to be an entrepreneur with a paycheck and health insurance. However, I do know that I make a terrible employee. I'm way too much on my own. But I love that this book not only talks about leadership, obviously in the corporate world of what it's really needed, as well as what things you can apply in your personal life too.

Loren Sanders 04:21

I think it makes you better overall, being empathetic isn't just about work. It's about life in general. It's about being human. It's about seeing other people as human beings.

Mia Voss 04:36

I looked up and I think you actually and this is what I love, too. You have a lot of examples. So I appreciate that too. I have a lot you have a lot of sources. And you mentioned earlier too, is it you're somebody that's super curious and like now I gotta prove that to myself. I need to know that I need to do my own research on that which I think is really lacking a lot when people make their decisions on how they stand in the world.

Mia Voss 04:59

Let me let me go see if that's actually true, right?

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Loren Sanders 04:59

The biggest thing that I'm bothered by right now in the world of social media is virtue signaling, virtuous virtue signaling. Look, look at how virtuous I am, because I believe XYZ. And I think this is a really important topic to talk about, but I don't put my time or my money or volunteer or do anything to help support whatever the thing is. That's virtue signaling, if you believe in it strongly enough, be an advocate more in more than just voice, practice it, get to know people who are going through it and living it, help people wherever you can just be a human being, that helps other human beings and be a part of a community

Mia Voss 05:49

that ties into the actual description of what Empathy means the desire to be seen, heard and have our needs responded to. And virtual virtue signaling cannot be less of a more of an opposite of that, too. I will say it if you want another thing, thing to do, folks, as you're listening to this as also, as you're watching that, and I see that a lot with posting is okay, that sounds great. You got you got me on an emotional stir. But you've given me absolutely no practical application to this besides just being upset about it, nothing to nothing to donate to or to point to and hey, if you're thinking this, then find out who your local sheriff is, or find out who your local school board is, and, you know, practical applications. So thank you for that. Because that is a rant, I get on get on often. But again, empathy, the desire to be heard, seen, and have our needs responded to. And that is, that is not something I think of it all like, in fact, like empathy in leadership sounds like an oxymoron to me

Loren Sanders 06:46

, which is why a lot of people consider it a weakness. But before we dig too deep in that I still want to respond to your question about Empath, and empathy. Yes, please. There are people in this world that are super empathic, which means they don't just come alongside people, and understand and see perspective. But they actually take on those feelings, it's an energy thing, right. So they might actually feel what the other person is feeling in a way that is not the same as compassion. I'm talking about real energy that can drain an empathic human being. So part of having empathy is having empathy for yourself, if you are an empath, knowing that and creating really good boundaries, ortools for yourself, so that you're not feeling responsible for somebody else's energy.

Mia Voss 07:49

And I have to tell you ahead of a real little brainstorm or reality check with because I am an empath. Empathy can't or being in that what you talked about in this book of ways you can be more when you say I have empathetic behaviors, I actually haven't been like this as much because I got so drained. So this was good for me as a reminder to go, Okay, take care of your energy. And now you can be have more empathetic behaviors towards others, either your business or your personal life. So I have to give you kudos for that, too. And thank you for explaining that because we as empaths can get like, oh, fuck this shit. I can't anymore. It's too much. And there's your first swear words for the show, ladies and gentlemen, enjoy.

Loren Sanders 08:33

I think getting to that point, though, everybody needs that oh, shit moment in their life, whether they're empathetic or not, whether they're an empath or not, you have to know this is time for me to make a change. And until you get to that crap, this is not good. This is not what I want. How did I get here, and you kind of look around and a little bit of confusion. That's the beginning, friends, of starting to make changes. Self awareness is the beginning of changing anything and everything. Whether it's empathy, whether it is some other goal that you have, that's what matters. Just take control of your own energy in that moment.

Mia Voss 09:15

And you use again, in the book, you use empathy as an acronym, I love and so activating self awareness was really, really a good, a good chapter for me as well. We'll dive into that in a second. But back on that of why it is seen as an oxymoron of empathy and leadership talk more about that as a weakness.

Loren Sanders 09:36

When people say empathy and leadership together, empathy is often thought of as kindness. And it's not the same thing. Kindness and empathy might go hand in hand. They might be close friends, but it's not the same thing. And I'll give you a very solid example.

Loren Sanders 09:58

Empathy is not not giving somebody feedback, because you're afraid of how they're going to respond to it. Empathy is the way that you give somebody feedback, not what we call drive by feedback, where I give you 10 reasons why you're driving me crazy. And I just keep on going and act like it never happened. It is it is about, "here's what happened. And this is what the impact of that is, and how can I come alongside you and help you get to where you need to be." And then you have to allow that other person to make a choice about whether or not they're going to take the steps that they need to be successful. And sometimes they don't want to, and they don't care. And other times they do, but it's about how you're delivering the feedback. It's about that not about not giving the feedback,

Loren Sanders 10:46

or only giving positive feedback, it is empathetic to give people corrective feedback and help them achieve more. And we have a second question people usually ask me when I say that is, well what about when it becomes ruinous, and it's a horrible thing, empathy. And what I usually tell them is ruinous empathy comes in when you've got somebody who can use empathy to draw people in into their circle, teaming with them, and then do terrible things to them. So empathy can be used for good, or it can be used for evil. And you have to be completely vigilant about what's happening in that moment to you. And that's where your energy comes in. I always tell my kids fall in love with somebody who you can't live without not somebody you can live with the minute excuses for your partner. Something is not right. And you should investigate that.

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Mia Voss 11:44

Lucky kids. I love that advice and ruinous empathy sounds like a weapon of a narcissistic person.

Loren Sanders 11:52

It can be. What's interesting is if you look at countries who are a little bit more violent than the United States, you might think that their soldiers have zero empathy at all, because they can just walk in and just massacre an entire family without thinking about it. But the reality is, those same soldiers are very empathetic, but it's an in group thing, right? They're empathetic to their own group, but not to anything outside their group. And we as humans tend to do that as well. So we might think we're super empathetic, because we have empathy for the group of people that we associate with on a regular basis. But then we may have lower tolerance for people outside of our own group.

Loren Sanders 12:38

And that's a whole other thing to dig into for an entire podcast probably

Mia Voss 12:42

it's so good. There's just so many little nuggets like ruinous empathy. I hadn't even heard that before. And I do think as far as with leadership, you know, being able to look at that and having those difficult conversations, that tying back that what you were saying before, too, is definitely in the toxic positivity space as well, too. And I heard you say on a previous interview, and I know you talked about in the book about constructive criticism, and then you know that it starts with, you know, construct, and that me being in the construction world, too, I found that such a fascinating way to describe it. Because if you just hear that in kind of the drive by sort of way, like I hear, can I give you some constructive criticism, I'm like, Fuck, no, you can't.

Mia Voss 13:25

But I love that. I love that that emotional intelligence is becoming a buzz phrase. And I'm all for people even thinking about emotional intelligence when it comes to this topic as well.

Loren Sanders 13:40

I'm a huge fan of emotional intelligence, I probably read more than a lot of people on the topic, because empathy fits so well into some of that emotional quotient that fits into emotional intelligence. And one of my favorite quotes of all time, is Plato's. And the quote goes like this, the worst of all deceptions is self deception. Until you recognize who you are and where you are, and what you're actually doing and are willing to face it, you're never going to change.

Loren Sanders 14:14

And I have a lot of people ask me about leaders they've worked with, or friends that are in their friend group, who just are constantly not self aware.

Loren Sanders 14:25

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And the reality is until they're willing to become self aware, there's nothing you can do to make somebody else self aware. This is about you, friends, it's about what you can do for yourself. It's about protecting yourself. It's about knowing where you are and what you can do to flex in one way or another.

Loren Sanders 14:47

But if you are with somebody who's not self aware, and they are damaging your psyche, that is, this is permission from me right now to get out of that

Mia Voss 14:59

It's messy people do not do not to fool don't do not be fooled by the judgment of why didn't they and it should be easy that that is definitely not something, especially if you've been steeped in that, or you come from, you know, being somebody who was I'm trying to think what the phrase is, if you're somebody who's who takes on a lot like the empathic type of thing, or, you know, you're somebody that that will just kind of get along to go along, that is not easy at all. It is so sneaky. And I love another quote that you have, that's good leaders have the ability to change their minds when presented with new information. And you can take that word leaders and just apply it to all of us to change your minds when presented with new information. I'd say that's one of the most difficult things going on in the mainstream world right now is, oh, here's the new information. Let me let me try and you know, because they always say like, oh, that really changed my mind on that social media posts Said no one ever right.

Loren Sanders 15:53

Agree. And what's interesting is people in general, they want accountability. They want people to be held accountable. But a lot of times, we want everybody else to be held accountable, but we don't want to be held accountable. So if you're over here thinking, Okay, I know all these people who aren't self aware, maybe it's time to take a look at yourself, maybe you are exhausted, maybe you're hangry, maybe you need a nap. If we're blaming everybody else, for everything else, that's a good indicator that we aren't self aware that we're taking on this victim mentality. And

Loren Sanders 16:38

feeling like everything happens to us. Those are all indicators that we may need to take a deeper look inside.

Mia Voss 16:46

Oh, that's that one hurt. Like I feel seen on that, because I do. I was thinking that when I reading this, if I've kind of going through this, I've been working with a friend of mine on some PR ideas and rebranding ideas for my multiple businesses. And it's so I've done a lot of as she likes to call it navel gazing. And so you really do start to see this pattern of things. And so I've literally been sitting and soaking in it a little bit as the old Palmolive commercials was used to say you're soaking in it, Madge.

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Loren Sanders 17:23

I remember that one.

Mia Voss 17:25

Tell me you're in your 50s without telling me you're in your 50s Ladies and gentlemen, and folks, but I do feel like that is such a great thing to just be like, oh, wait a second. And you do give a lot of examples of that of people and and you had such a gracious leader that helped you work through that in several different ways of being in high level positions, where you are definitely in that kind of hustle culture, lean in type of thing. And did you have anything else you want to add to that? Because it was gonna go in a different direction real quick, but I wanted to give you an opportunity because you have so many good little bonmots that you have to say, oh, no,

Loren Sanders 18:01

I want to totally follow your trail. Okay, good.

Mia Voss 18:03

Because I'm all over the place because I'm so excited with all this. I do. I know you mentioned we about blind spots, which I thought was really interesting. That's also that's actually the first the first point so we're gonna jump around a little bit of you know, having these these different blind spots in your perception Invisible Gorilla. I was like, fascinated with he also talked about incarceration bias because you use so many different stories, which I which I love to, and then of course, talking about Minda Harts in the book "The Memo" , I was so excited that you you brought that up too, because I think that's that's a blind spot to is not being able to see oh my gosh, it's not everybody else. That's the problem. It's me. Hi.

Loren Sanders 18:50

That book was just game changing for me, because it helped me recognize more of my bias with Minda Harts. . Another one that I read recently, and I was lucky enough to actually connect with the author leader. Her name is Francine Parham. And she wrote a book called Please sit over there. And there was new things that really connected with me and her book. She talks about getting ready for her first day of work as a SVP of HR and a fortune 500 company and she's got her dress on point her hose are on point. Her shoes are on point. And she walks into the organization goes up to the rack to the registration desk to check in. And the receptionist looks at her and says Please sit over there. And I probably neglected to tell you that she's a black woman.

Mia Voss 19:44

I knew she was just from that comment

Loren Sanders 19:48

She said "over there". And then it goes into the ruminations that are kind of going on in our brain of what she should have said that was something that resonated with me about how quickly do we make

judge That's about people we don't even know. And you don't know who you're talking to. You don't know their story, you don't know why they're here. You don't know what they're doing. And until we get curious and ask about people, we can't make, make any connections, we can't know what is going on. And people have stories throughout throughout the book. But people are so multifaceted. And things that you might say, Words matter. And you might not remember the words that you used, but some of them stay for a long time with people. I mean, honestly, me, I can think of something that somebody said to me in kindergarten, that has stuck with me my entire life. And I'll share it with you. And I've never shared this with anybody before. So this has been the interesting moment. One of my kindergarten classmates, finding out that my family was Jewish. told me I killed his father. Wow, meaning. Yeah. And I have never forgotten that. And I'm humbled now, I was five years old at the time. But that was just earth shattering for me.

Mia Voss 21:25

Yeah, it's so powerful. And I think it's great to acknowledge that as well, to have one to sit with your own pain of that that was so real for you. And that's not something to ever go well, I was only five years old. And this and that, like, that is such a powerful thing. And then, as part of what you talk about in this book is turning it around to saying, Okay, now how am I affecting people, when I see how powerfully those words got to me, and this is what I loved it before I as I started the book, and then started getting into it. And all of this ties into inclusivity. And part of that inclusivity is being as being uncomfortable with the unfamiliar, which is what we're talking about of like making assumptions about people or disabled that's different than me. And I do love that you said, hiring people just like us, or even being around people, like us just duplicates the things we do not do well.

Loren Sanders 22:18

It's like "why would you duplicate your weaknesses?."

Mia Voss 22:23

A lot of people don't see it as a weakness, though, and that's, that's part of this awareness.

Loren Sanders 22:27

When you think that you want to respond a certain way, I'll just encourage everybody, pause for a minute. And think about what you're going to say before it just comes out. And think, is this going to be helpful to anybody? How would I feel if somebody said this to me? Consider asking questions instead of making judgments.

Mia Voss 22:51

Right? And questions? Not like, so where are you really from? Just want people to like when they're just we're asking people to to clarify why they deserve to be there that that says please sit over there, I'm really going to check that book out. That's just that's so incredibly powerful. I really do love that. I was thinking about that, even with inclusivity. And I had a conversation with a with a really close loved one not to be named. And we talked about there, I was surprised that their their discomfort at at

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pronouns. And I said, Okay, so first of all, how often is somebody coming to you and really taking you to the woodshed about using the wrong pronoun? Has it happened? Are you just reading about it? You're just reading about it, right? Most people are kind of at it. And even if they're not, that's okay, too, if they're just frustrated, is it? But second of all, why would you want to be on the side of not doing something that's unfamiliar to you to make someone else feel comfortable, and it really got through to them. And I was really excited.

Loren Sanders 23:58

I love that. I love that so much.

Mia Voss 24:00

Thank you, That's high praise from you, because I'm loving everything that you're telling me as well, too. So any other thoughts on this, because I've just jumped around so much and you give so you give so much data and information and things to point to as well. And your book, which I absolutely love as as evidence of what you're trying to get people to be aware of.

Loren Sanders 24:23

I'll just close you with this. The book tells stories. And the stories are about people who were treated really terribly. And the story is also about leaders who were really terrible, and how they overcame it. So if you're somebody who doesn't think that you're high on the empathy scale, I want to leave you with a thought that empathy is not really a skill, it's a practice. And if you're not practicing it, you aren't getting worse. It's something you have to practice every day. Reflective The end of every day think about what you did well, what you could do better it matters. And if you're somebody who's in a situation where you're being treated poorly, and it's very toxic, I want you to know, there's hope.

Mia Voss 25:13

I love that it's not too late to start, if you I mean, you had, you had to get to that to have like, Okay, I've been kind of little leader for a while good kudos on you. You didn't give the blanket, I'm sorry, if somebody was hurt by what I did. Like you didn't

Loren Sanders 25:27

apologize. in a major way, for the dust that I left in my path when I was not doing great things as a leader. And not I refer people and I, some of them I've gotten to apologize to some of them, I haven't, but I will be truly sorry for the rest of my life, for some of the things that I did or said to people, when I was completely ignorant, and also single without children, and disparaging parents for having life outside of work.

Mia Voss 26:07

Yes, and I think that is a really great point to point out of women our age, we were really taught a certain way to to be in business, which was completely the masculine way without any femininity, or that feminine, but in a kind of the more of the feminine type of way too, which was what empathy gets

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confused with. It's not a male, female. It's this balance of masculine and feminine, which I love. And again, empathy it made don't feel badly. It's it's not necessarily natural. But it's something you can work on. So So Lauren, thank you so much. I appreciate you.

Loren Sanders 26:45

Thank you, we I appreciate you too. And all of that things that you raised to the surface. In your podcast. I'm just grateful for you. I am

Mia Voss 26:52

grateful for you as well to honey. Thank you. Thanks for tuning in everyone.

Loren Sanders 26:56

Thanks, everybody.

Mia Voss 27:00

Okay, we thought we were done. But Lauren took a fun, juicy little story, right after we ended the recording. So here we go.

Loren Sanders 27:08

So I recently moved from Illinois to Iowa, and I had the opportunity to hear a political candidate speak. And there were some men and women in the room. And I noticed that when women asked questions, that the response was given only to the men in the room. So if a woman was with her husband, the candidate would then respond to just the husband, even though the woman asked the question. And I spoke to him a little bit about it afterwards. And he didn't recognize that he was doing that. So that was an aha moment for him. But over time, and as I got to know this person, as a human being, I realized that there's a lot of difference in generational ideas about how to address somebody of the opposite gender. And what he was doing was what he thought was being respectful to the husband, by not necessarily speaking directly to the wife, but trying to engage the husband in the conversation, too. And had I not asked that question, I probably would have walked away with a very different picture of this person as a human being, and probably would have remained in my anger at the misogyny of the situation. But it's good to ask questions. Otherwise, we really don't know.

Mia Voss 28:34

We don't. And when you told me that story, I was in the Roundhouse Kick mode of like, what? And I also love that this is an evangelical man in his 60s Who's a different political party than you. And so giving that a chance is now giving you an opportunity to also keep that conversation going. So thank you for adding that Lauren. I appreciate I love that story. Appreciate it. Thank you.

Mia Voss 29:01

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