

DARE TO UN-LEAD

The Art of Relational Leadership in a Fragmented World

The Podcast



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Episode 2 – Stowe Boyd

The failure & fallacy of leadership:
Work Anthropologist Stowe Boyd



We need to debunk leadership – often, a toxic set of obsolete behaviors. How to end our addiction to this model? Work anthropologist Stowe Boyd analyzes what’s going on in organizations and in society. You will learn about control, governance and democracy at work; the “woowoo” that fails to engage people; and promising new operating models. Our conversation opens unconventional ways to approach work in a changing world.

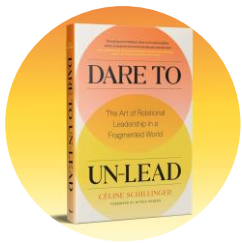
Podcast Transcript

Celine: It is tempting to think that more leadership or some kind of improved leadership will help us and our organizations work better. But what if leadership was part of the problem instead of the solution? What if our understanding of it only maintained principles of the past, which no longer serve as well?

That's what I explore in my book, *Dare to Un-Lead*, and today in this podcast. Join me and my guest, a person quoted in the book or in tune with its values, to learn from them what it takes to un-lead and succeed together.

Welcome to the second episode of The Dare to Un-Lead podcast. Over the course of 11 episodes with a guest, we explore chapter by chapter, the major themes discussed in the book. I hope you've enjoyed episode one with Living Organization Thinker Myron Rogers as much as I have. This episode introduced us to change in the living systems that organizations are, what works, what doesn't work, what to watch out for, et cetera.

Today we're going to get into the meat of leadership echoing chapter two of the book, which is titled The Persistent Failure and Fallacy of Leadership. What?? Persistent failure fallacy? Well, yes, definitely. We don't beat around the bush here. It's time to see through the harmful myth of



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leadership that we've been fed through courses, books, public speeches, and supposedly inspiring individuals.

And I imagine that my guest of the day, Stowe Boyd thinks alike. We'll ask him, right? Stowe Boyd is a sharp and engaged observer of the world of work. He has already a rich career behind him, that started in software systems and engineering, and that blossomed into strategic planning and writing for professional media, research and analysis, especially in areas related to digital, social business, and the future of work.

Today's Stowe is managing director, founder, Chief Scientist of Work Futures and Forward Industry Fellow at RMIT University, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

I met Stowe I think 10 years ago or so at a conference in Paris, and I've always kept in touch. I admire his intellectual curiosity and the extent of the knowledge he shares with us. I admire his unabashed opinions, his no-nonsense and humorous nature, which is so refreshing in a field overflowing with egos.

Stowe, thank you so much for being here. And welcome.

Stowe: It's, it's great to be with you again.

Celine: Thank you.

Stowe: I've been looking forward to it.

Celine: Oh, that's awesome. And me too. And Stowe, let's start with the first question. What is your art? What do you do? What does a work anthropologist do? How do you do it in your way?

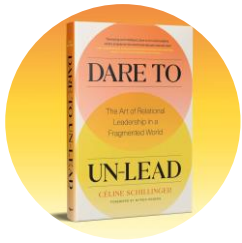
Stowe: I'm not sure. I'm not sure what I do is an art, but I would say, I'm dedicated to the principles and practices of sense making. I feel that my job is much like being a teacher, that I'm trying to explain things or connect things together that maybe other people haven't connected.

As an iconoclast, the notion of debunking conventional wisdom, for example, is one of those higher aspirations for me. So that's basically it. And then, and if there is an art aspect of it, it's that I spent a lot of time writing, in order to do that.

The nature of the pandemic led to the cessation of a lot of conferences. In the past, I've done a lot of public speaking, but that's really changed in just the last few years. And I think that's fine. I enjoy writing and it's an equally interesting way to make sense of things. It's just a little less social, I think.

Celine: And what led you to doing that?

Stowe: I guess I've always been intrigued with... I got there very early on. I was a head of a software company and I sold it off to my publicly traded competitor and a couple of years later that company was acquired. And I was set free with a big pile of money. I mean, enough to take a couple of years off and pay for my kids' college education.



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And I took on a job right away of writing a newsletter for a company called Cutter Consortium. And I never really stopped. In 1999 I started blogging. I was president of a little media company called Corante, where I met wonderful people. We had like 70 bloggers working for us.

And so I never really stopped. And so now, it's just a matter of course for me as I get up in the morning or read things and write things. That's how I got started.

Celine: That's awesome. And what are the underlying principles of your work? How would you describe those, if any?

Stowe: Well, I think like a lot of other people, I have a certain number of issues, questions that burn brightly in my mind. And so I'm constantly on the lookout for more information, better understanding of those questions. So, I have a strong belief in the power of curiosity and its central importance. To be a thinking being in the world we live in.

I wrote a piece a couple of years ago called 10 work skills for the post-normal world. That was motivated by something I read from the Davos crowd, the WEF, and I think those things stand the test of time, those kinds of skills that I wrote about and I invite people to go look at the whole list [see show notes]

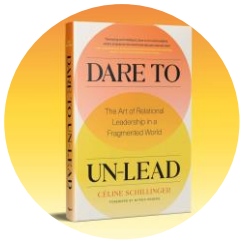
One of them is curiosity, and I think it's the central and most important behavior. It creates a powerful loop that both provides stability to people and also derives learning. So I think that's the most central one. I could go into detail, but, I think that trumps everything else that in creative uncertainty, being uncertain about things, that notion of having strong opinions that are weakly held I think is another equally very important principle that's necessary.

Celine: I love that. You're a recognized thought leader in the field of "the future of work", behind which you can put anything. The future of work. Are there any specific issues or questions or patterns you're paying attention to in this gigantic field that is the future work?

Stowe: Yes, I'm fascinated with the rise of, the apparent resurgence of interest in unionization. I think that's actually central to some of the things we might want to talk about today with the nature of this failure of leadership. I think that's an interesting one. I've always been interested in human cognition and how that complicates and animates what goes on in the world of work, in the business world. So I'm constantly sifting through things, trying to find out more about that. So, and like I said a long time ago, in a connected world, the most important thing is who you choose to follow. I mean follow their work, right?

You quote a bunch of people in this chapter that I follow everything they write if I can. That's, I think, a very important thing. So these are shared ideas that a lot of us are writing about and thinking about, and so it's critically important to have that 12 questions or whatever in your mind, written down and then be in pursuit of more and more information about them and try to make sense of it. I think that's what I'm doing as a thought leader.

And one of the things I've written about a lot is, the failures of leadership. The fact that we ascribe so much to these figures. In a way that goes back to the Bronze Age. I mean, it's incredibly primitive stuff that we just take as a given and, in fact, I think that's very problematic. I think it's intrinsically problematic, and it's not that people aren't doing that job well, which may be true, but the notion that we should have a system that's based on the charismatic leadership of kings, for example. I



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mean, I think that's dangerous and we're better off as we figure out how to get away from it as quickly as we can.

Celine: Do you think it's human nature? Do you think we need that somehow, or...? What's behind that?

Stowe: No... But I think it's deeply enmeshed in the system of capitalism that animates the world that we live in.

And that's problematic. I mean, management, leadership in business is given their power by the shareholders, the owners. To do the will, if you will, of the owners. And everything else is secondary. And that's the way, for years, that people interpreted the nature of businesses, that's the way it's supposed to be.

Everybody else is secondary, all the people at work in the businesses are just tools to be applied, hands on, pulling the wrenches in the factory and, I think we're trapped in that. And so the sooner we get out of it, the better. I think it's a problem.

Celine: There's nothing *intrinsically bad* about choosing a person to be at the forefront, to lead for others. But it seems we tend to be following the worst leaders in all sorts of fields: politics, business, medicine et cetera. Do you think we're addicted to bad leaders or do you think power changes people, changes leaders? Or is there anything specific to the times we're in? or not really? What do you think?

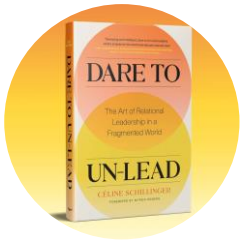
Stowe: There's a lot of interesting research that says, for example, businesses naturally tend to select for senior leadership roles, people that have certain characteristics, behavioral characteristics, or psychological characteristics. And so some people have actually measured it and, maybe as much as 5 or 6% in typical businesses, the leaders are pathologically evil, they're psychopaths. There's even a thread of this discussion that suggests that the high death rate of senior executives is due to them being murdered by other executives. Murdered. I'm not even kidding, it's a very high number.

So if, in fact, businesses are naturally selecting for kinds of people and 5% of them are psychopaths, then, we're involved in a system that first of all is like musical chairs, it's designed so that there will be people at the top of a pyramid and they go through some selection process, and at the end there's one chair left and one guy sitting on it. Usually it's a *guy* too.

So, maybe that's not the best way to select people to, for example, create an environment in which human wellbeing and passion, belongingness and the desire for purpose in our lives [flourish]... if the person selected to create that environment is a likely a psychopath or 5% chance; and that the other people that are also in the running also have terrible characteristics, because the way the system works. Maybe that's not the best setup, right? But that's the one we have.

There are enlightened beings who somehow find their way into positions of authority in big companies, but there's also a lot of people that are just not nice people. Even at the best they don't put first the interests of the people that are in the business that work for them.

Celine: The chapter opens with a quote I really find admirable from John Steinbeck who wrote; "It has always seemed strange to me that the things we admire in men, kindness and generosity, openness, honesty, understanding, and feeling are the concomitants of failure in our system. And



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those traits, we detest: sharpness, greed, acquisitiveness, meanness, egotism and self-interest are the traits of success; and while men admire the quality of the first, they love the produce of the second”.

Stowe: He says it better than me, but I was basically saying the same thing.

Celine: It's amazing. By the way, in this chapter you are quoted too. You're quoted saying: “When passing through the door of our workplaces, we step back into a constitutional monarchy, much like those of the 1700s”. It's a sentence from an article of yours, titled “Today's business organization is an oligarchy and that needs to change”. Can you explain? Can you say anything about it?

Stowe: The constitutional monarchy is the notion that there are royals in the world that are royal because of who their grandparents were and so on. And it gets passed down. Right? And so it's a sense that there's an elite that are dubbed “the leaders”. For example, think about the military, which has gotten relaxed in recent era, but there's still a fundamental divide. There's officers and non officers, right? And officers are gentlemen, or now gentlewomen; I suppose. And these are typically people that are, the classic thing, the college-educated. They studied management theory or economics or law or whatever. And the other people are [those] who went to high school maybe, or maybe a lesser college, and they apply and get a job, but they're not grouped with the owners and the managers that the owners put in control of the business.

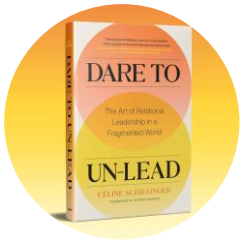
So there's a sort of an elite, and there's a myth of meritocracy that says, these people rise to the top because of their characteristics or their education, or that they are the son of the founder. And so then naturally, sitting in the boardroom or whatever.

But I think this is, like I said before, it's a bronze age kind of notion, and it's been better said by people like Elizabeth Anderson who talks about it in her book on Private Government, right? The notion is that we give control to these people who run the enterprise, with some notion of governance, but it's a private government, subject to only its own rules. I mean, there are conventions that are sort of carried across, but how businesses decide to do what they do and how they evaluate people and how they try to motivate people so it's really left up to them.

There's degrees of governance that governments try to reach into businesses and control them. For example, witness this breakthrough where it seems like now we're going to make non-complete clauses illegal in the United States. Great! If it can get through the Supreme Court, we'll see. But that's an example of a thing that businesses decided to do and just did. In some places it was made illegal by state governments. But otherwise it was widely practiced. And who says “why is that fair?” Well, they just – it's good for them, so they did it. There's this funny quote: “anything that 500 businessmen agree to do becomes legal in America”.

So I think the notion that you pass through the door and you're now a subject to a constitutional monarchy, or in Anderson's terms, you're now a subject to a private government, I think is a compelling way to think about it. And so in fact, I believe that we should take that paradigm forward and for example, switch to a completely transactional relationship between the employees, the manages: [that's how] I call the employees that aren't managers, manages.

They should form unions and allow the union to do all the negotiation and have a purely transactional relationship with the business and not get involved in what some people call enmeshment. The companies attempt to enmesh us to, through notions like, employee engagement



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and team building exercises and all sorts of other things; so that we can get all “woo woo” about the, common purpose and how wonderful it is to be working in a great company that really loves its people, blah, blah, blah.

And then there's a downturn in the economy and they cut 30% of their people without a single thought. It's the technique to get people to push faster and harder, get productivity high and so on. Well, that's not what I'm about. I want to live my life and have a family, and I would like to have job security and I would like a steady pay check, but I'm not gonna get all “woo woo” anymore.

And I think that's what a lot of this recent surge of disengagement [is about], and all the people that are quitting their jobs, a great resignation or whatever you wanna call it, there's a million names for it. It's just people saying, I don't buy it anymore. I don't. Don't try to wiggle your fingers in my eyes and put foo foo dust on everything.

I just want to have a life and I want stability and purpose. Yes. It's my own purpose. It's not, something that you hired a consulting firm to come in and put up on the posters, on the walls, in the cafeteria. I think we should go all the way, right, and just say “it's employment”. I've got a job, I do my work, you pay me.

And, don't expect me to turn on a dime. This is this whole thing about people being disengaged because they don't like change – change for what? What purpose is this change serving? Yeah. They're trying to get us to go faster and produce more light bulbs per hour, but I don't care. I shouldn't put that as the highest priority in my life.

So I think that's what it is. It's a growing disenchantment with the neoliberal concept of a corporation and everyone should be working at a common purpose to reach these higher goals. And, if we do that, we'll change the world. [Yet] most companies aren't Patagonia, they're, they're just trying to make light bulbs, pay back huge amounts of money to the investors.

The disenchantment that I'm talking about is significant these days. And, but you look at what's gone on in the last three decades, all of this money has been pulled away.

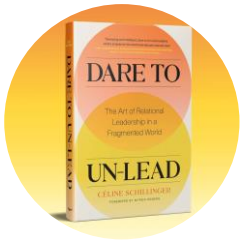
Even though company people have become incredibly productive, all that value is given to the owners and the managers, and the average person is making roughly the same amount of dollars as they were making 25 years ago. And that means that they're poorer, even though they're more productive, it's just completely unfair.

So I think we should just take the blinders off our eyes and say, these leaders who are supposedly leading us into a brave new future are just exploiting the hell out of us or exploiting the hell out of people that work in businesses.

I'm a solo [worker], so I don't actually have a boss or any of that.

Celine: And they're exploiting themselves too, as well. They're managing themselves as assets that need to be managed.

Stowe: Right. And they have incredibly long work weeks and they kill themselves and they're stressed out and yes, they're victims of it as well, but of course they're getting really well paid for it.



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Celine: What does a good leader look like in your opinion? How do they behave?

Stowe: There's a new emerging model of, a sort of enlightened, progressive thinking about leadership.

The fundamental notion is that you have certain people who are managing a product line or something in the business. And their job is to get resources and knock down the barriers so that the people who are actually building that kind of refrigerator or whatever, can get their job done and are tightly aligned with the needs of customers and so on. But they're in a sense, facilitators, right?

And then at the highest level, there's a – [but] I think of it as a circle. At the outer circle, you can envision the job of people who are trying to create an environment in which product things connect or services can happen. And so their role is sort of creating an environment in which it's possible for these kinds of things to happen. And setting a course, saying, “yes, we're gonna be the best appliance company in the world”. I'm thinking of Haier as an example. Cause at the time I was writing this stuff, I was working with them on writing about these kinds of concepts.

And then there's a sort of intermediate level of leadership where people are trying to grapple with things across. Let's [consider] products, cause it's a good example. Like all the refrigerator lines that we have inside of the business have to have certain standards, and conventions that make everything workable. And so [those leaders] would be in the role of sort of arbitrating over all the refrigerator brands inside of a company as opposed to somebody else who would be taking care of all the air conditioning brands, that sort of thing, and getting people to work together or compete against each other.

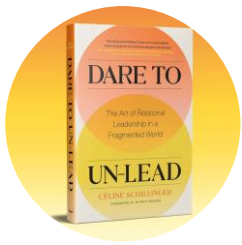
So there's this multiple tier model, but the leaders are people that are not telling you what to do. They're creating a context. At greater or lesser size, creating a context in which people actually can do their thing.

It operates like a city, not an army if you will. People are coming and going and, if somebody decides to put a deli on that corner, well, you don't have to get permission from the mayor to open the deli. You just have to meet the rules of zoning and the health department, and so on. So there's a lot more entrepreneurialism fundamentally in such a model and less directed, controlled, mandated kind of growth.

I think that's a fascinating model. It's just not very widely applied. The people that do things like that are pretty successful, but strangely enough, it turns out it's very, very difficult to adopt this model. It took Haier, as one of the best examples, decades going through many troubled transitions to get to the end state.

Celine: That's really interesting. And I actually have reservations about [it]. Not really the Haier model itself, although I find it to be extremely competitive; and I wonder what its consequences on quality and on human health are. I don't know about this, but Lee Bryant will be a guest in one of the episodes of the Dare to Un-Lead podcast and I'm really happy to speak about structure. I actually think our focus on structure is a little bit overrated and there are many other things we can, we *should* pay attention to in order to work better collectively.

Now, if you were appointed as head of an organization, a big one, maybe what would be your first move? What would you do?



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Stowe: I'd go around and talk to people and listen to them. I think there's a whole bunch of things that would have to be based on [the assessment of] how the company runs now, what's its situation?

And, I would [lead] based on a bunch of principles. I think it has to be principle based. You should try to push the greatest degree of autonomy as possible to individuals, groups, other assemblages of people, departments or whatever. And, try to root out evil, the things that are baked in that are just bad.

I would be the kind of person that would attempt to build employee councils as a part of the governance structure of the business. So it's like: "we want you to be unionized, please". Each group, like the designers can join the designers union, and the people working in the plant, the people who are driving our trucks, whatever – please be unionized. Let's start with that and then we'll build a worker's council as part of our board of directors. That's the first thing.

It's the kind of thing you see very commonly in, say Germany or the Netherlands, where they [had this] as part of the post World War II regeneration of Europe. That was necessary and they didn't fight against it. They embraced it. They went with it. And I think it's something we severely lack here in the US.

Celine: That would be awesome. I think it would need some revisiting here in Europe as well, because over the years those things have often morphed into an additional bureaucracy or a set of fixed roles and maybe not as co-constructive as it was intended to be.

But nevertheless, it's a great asset to cultivate and nurture. I agree.

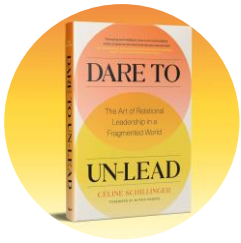
Stowe: The one example that we're confronted with right now, all these large businesses that just laying people off. There's been a history of not doing that in these large companies that have workers' councils. And what they do is they put a value on the fact that when the economy turns around again, we want to hold onto our trained people so they can gear up with the return of the economy.

For example, in America, our airlines, even though we gave them all kinds of money to *not do this*, they fired all their pilots and flight attendants. And so then when things came back, they, we got into this horrible mess because they couldn't hire them back fast enough. Right? So we had all this air travel problems for the last year and, and most recently, these ridiculous [events], the FAA going down and the Southwest Airlines catastrophe, that was just ghastly because of them consistently not investing in the technology they needed to, because they were pulling all the money out and giving it to the shareholders.

I think that companies would do a different job about how they handle people, if those people actually had a voice at what was going on as opposed to being treated like sheep with their fleeces all being snipped off and [being] sent off to the butcher shop.

[Yet] I think that, yes, you can have situations where unionization, especially in the context of businesses that oppose them, can be problematic.

Celine: That's awesome. Stowe, we're coming to the end of our chat today. What would you say to someone who hasn't read *Dare to Un-Lead* yet? Apart from "read it!", what would you say?



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Stowe: I think I would recommend they'd read it the way I read it, which was slowly, in fact, I did a quick read when you sent me the galleys so I can make some comments, but then I put it aside and I read a, a couple of pages of a chapter and then I put the book down and I tried to think about the ideas over time.

In fact, I have this heavily annotated pdf. I've gotta open up my screen right now. Here's all the things that I pulled up that were incredibly important to me.

And as I mentioned, there's not only the people that you quote that are brilliant, but, going through a full chapter of this and trying to assimilate it all in, let's say, one reading, which you could do, you could actually read it that fast.

But I don't think it's a good way to approach it. I think it's very rich and so you have to let it work its weight on you over time.

Celine: I must say that's the way I read your newsletters. Work Futures is probably one of the only newsletters I read very regularly. Maybe not all issues as soon as they're published, but I save them and I get back to them because they're incredibly insightful. You curate – it's more than curation. You curate, but then you comment, you weave threads. You make sense. You talked about sense making in the beginning of this show, which is exactly why I love reading Work Futures. So thank you, thank you, thank you. Please do it for many, many years.

Where can people find you? On Substack, that's right?

Stowe: [Workfutures.io](https://workfutures.io). I have my own domain, so that's an easy way. I also write occasionally things that aren't about the future of work, and you can take a look at stoweboyd.com for that.

I also occasionally have certain topics I write on medium. So when I'm writing about these tools for thought, for example, I use Obsidian as my set of workings. I write about that at Medium because there's a really big community there that's interested in it, but primarily, workfeatures.io if people are interested in the future of work angle, that's the place to go.

Celine: Awesome. All links will be attached to the description of this episode. Thank you so much, Stowe. It was really delightful to have you with us and I wish you the very best and we keep in touch for the future of work, more insights and constructive criticism of the world, of work and of current leadership.

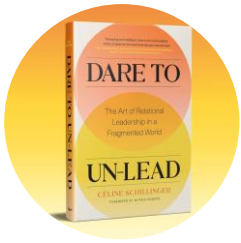
Thank you.

Stowe: Thank you for having me.

Celine: Great insights. Thank you all for listening. You'll find more info in *Dare to Un-Lead*, the book. And all links in the podcast episode description.

And now what else? Action! To explore further and apply these ideas to your own context, reach out to me celine@weneedsocial.com

Let's un-lead together!



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Podcast resources

Stowe Boyd is a sharp thinker on all things related to the future of work, technology, and the intersection of the two. His long experience as both an executive and an analyst, his unparalleled curiosity and critical eye make him an intellectual authority in the field. His views often run counter to the techno-idealist, libertarian-capitalist consensus prevalent in Silicon Valley and its market ecosystem. Stowe's ideas offer the possibility for a healthy distancing from the sometimes aberrant patterns of operation in which we find ourselves immersed.

I first met Stowe at an Enterprise 2.0 conference in Paris in 2013. I was a bit intimidated by his aura and his somewhat gruff side. I managed to get a selfie a few years later :) Stowe is always experimenting with community platform solutions, and while sometimes it's dizzying, I've always followed him there to learn a little of what he learns.

Nowadays (before the next change probably) Stowe writes and interacts with his readers mainly on Substack. I highly recommend his Work Futures newsletter to all change practitioners, and more broadly to anyone in the corporate world. It's a wealth of valuable information, and a healthy resource for critical thinking.

Curious to know more?

Read [Dare To Un-Lead: The Art of Relational Leadership in a Fragmented World](#).

Stowe Boyd and some of his ideas can be found in *Dare To Un-Lead*:

Boyd, Stowe, p. 166

The Persistent Fallacy and Failure of Leadership, 21

Anderson, Elizabeth, 121–22

unions, 165–66

Liberty under Control, 90

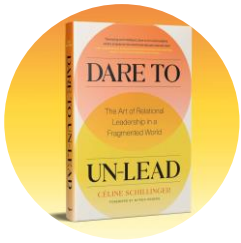
Read the two articles by Stowe mentioned in our conversation

[10 work skills for the postnormal era](#) (2017)

[Today's business organization is an oligarchy, and that needs to change](#) (2016)

Read Stowe's newsletter Work Futures on Substack: <https://www.workfutures.io/>

Read [my interview by Stowe](#) ahead of the release of Dare To Un-Lead (Jan. 2022). This interview is [available in French here](#)



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Read a much earlier (2014!) interview by Stowe <https://stoweboyd.medium.com/sociology-interview-celine-schillinger-96881e5755ef>

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