

DARE TO UN-LEAD

The Art of Relational Leadership in a Fragmented World

The Podcast



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Episode 4 – Lois Kelly

The Joys and Sorrows of Rebels at Work:
Change Mentor Lois Kelly



Good rebels just want to do great work. So why is it hard? Hostile work cultures, but also self-sabotage, hinder change makers. For a decade, Lois Kelly has been championing ‘people who think differently, work bravely, laugh generously, and live optimistically’. She reveals the keys to successful change, which always starts with oneself.

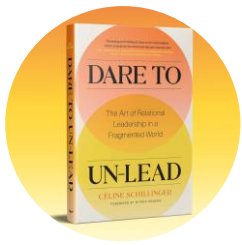
Podcast Transcript

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. This is the fourth episode of The Dare to Un-lead podcast. Across 11 episodes, we explore with different guests the major themes addressed in the book. Myron Rogers introduced us in episode one to Living System Theory applied to organizations and Stowe Boyd challenged in episode two our fascination for leadership.

In episode three, Jeff Boudro talked about the dynamics that take place in human systems with great regularity, and that can impede our capacity for change. Oops, I said the C word. Change. Do you consider yourself a change maker? A change leader? A change agent, a corporate rebel? Well, then this episode is for you.



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It echoes chapter four of the book, which is titled “It starts with Oneself: on Becoming a Change Agent”. I believe it is useful to examine this role closely, to deconstruct it even a little. What does it mean to be a change maker? What are the pitfalls rebels most often face? And how much of this comes from themselves? How can they be more successful?

The very first person I thought of for this conversation is Lois Kelly, the co-founder with Carmen Medina of Rebels at Work.

Together, they wrote a “handbook for leading change from within”, an extremely useful book, whose title is *Rebels at Work*. Lois is an artist, an author. Her books *Naked Hearted [How Bullshit, Parkinson's and John Lennon Changed My Life]* and *Be the Noodle [50 Ways To be A Compassionate, Courageous, Crazy-Good Caregiver]* are in her image, both profound and sensitive.

Her leadership consulting practice is grounded in Lois's long corporate experience in executive roles and her acute understanding of human behaviors. Lois is a person of great intelligence and great humanity. A woman who has inspired me enormously to this date and whom I have long considered a mentor.

We first met online about 10 years ago, then in person several times when I settled near where she lives in beautiful Providence, Rhode Island. I no longer live in the US but we met again to my great pleasure recently on my book tour and today I am absolutely delighted to have you on the show. Lois, welcome.

Lois: Thank you so much, Celine. What a lovely introduction.

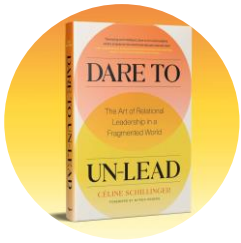
Celine: Lois, I'll ask the first question I ask all my guests on this show. What is your art? What is the professional practice that you would describe as unique to you or that you perform in a unique way? What is your art, Lois?

Lois: I think my art is observation and listening. Throughout my career in different roles, I've always observed emerging trends, things that were, you know, kind of building and about to happen and, people say, well, how are you onto that? And I think it's reading, talking to different people, just kind of expanding your awareness and network and then beginning to see patterns and what the implications of those patterns might be. So that's my favorite thing. And there's some years where in my career I've been very quiet. You know, I haven't been writing or speaking, and it's because I'm observing, you know, I'm looking, and I think when things are changing, sometimes we have to be very quiet, to pick up the signals and to listen to other people, and that's what gives me most satisfaction in my work.

Celine: That's awesome. And what led you to this?

Lois: Well, I was trained as a journalist. So, starting when I was in high school, I worked for a local newspaper in Boston. It was an award-winning newspaper, and the editor and publisher were wonderful people.

And the more I asked, well, could I write that? Could I learn how to take these pictures? They took me under their wings and they taught me how to ask good questions. And I think asking good questions and making people feel comfortable when you ask those questions, that's how you get information. That's how you get insights. That's how you learn.



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So when I graduated from college, I was offered a job as a journalist, and the pay was so low. And I had so many student loans that I took a job in corporate for AT&T. But I always [kept] that foundation of journalism, you know, asking questions, seeing patterns, and communicating in ways that were..... people could understand what you were saying. Those have been lifelong skills.

Celine: Did you enjoy the corporate world? And if yes, why are you no longer there ?

Lois: There were some things I enjoyed about the corporate world. I had some amazing experiences and some very frustrating experiences and, you know, when I was young, I'm a fire starter, so I'm not a good project manager, detail oriented. I mean, I could certainly have done that, but I like the ideas and the creative part of things. And I was young and I was making a speech to 200 AT&T executives. My knees were all cut up from, I had fallen rollerblading in Central Park. But it was a fascinating speech. And even then, I think I was 23, maybe 24. And I was talking about what could be different.

And the president of the company came up to me afterwards and he said, you seem, and this is the language, like a very smart young girl with a lot of ideas, and I'm going to give you some advice. You should either go into sales, or you should head up to Madison Avenue because if you are responsible for revenue and you're bringing in revenue, people will listen to your ideas.

And he said, I can see that you're an idea person. You have to establish your credibility for people to accept your ideas, which was some of the best advice I got. You know, if we're not credible, people are less likely to listen to us. I mean, it's fundamental. So, I went to Madison Avenue and I made lots of money for agencies and I had a lot of creative freedom. And so, most of my working life was in big agencies.

Celine: And then?

Lois: And then I started my own practice. I wish I could tell you that there was some strategic plan, but I was working for a company; it had just been sold to a bigger company; I was commuting three and a half hours a day. I had an infant, and I just couldn't, I couldn't do it all, quite frankly.

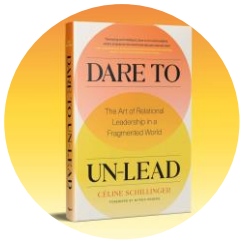
So I left without a plan except knowing what I really liked, what I was really good at, and I had really wonderful relationships with my clients and CEOs, so I was able to kind of build a business around strategic communications pretty quickly.

Celine: And how did you come to this, the theme for which you are pretty famous today, the "corporate rebel"? How does this theme touch you?

Lois: You know, again I wish I could say there was a master plan, and this is why I encourage everybody to just.... Serendipity and listening and observing how you respond to things are often giving you clues.

And with rebels, I was at a business innovation conference in Providence, and the next to the last speaker was Carmen Medina, and she was talking about being a heretic at the CIA and how hard it is to create change inside large organizations, and the conference was all entrepreneurs and you know, people who were CEOs.

And her point was, it's easy when you're head of the company, to talk about change; when you are in it or in the belly of the beast, it's much more difficult. There's something, I was sitting in the



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audience and it just spoke to me and I just said, yes! This is a huge issue that no one is addressing that I had experienced so often.

And I marched down to the front of the room and introduced myself to Carmen and I said, we should really get together and talk because there's something here. And we started talking and we said, well, we don't know: would people care about this or not? And we decided to just start writing a blog and see where it went.

Celine: And it went far, right?

Lois: It's a huge pent-up! You know, people have so many amazing ideas, so much frustration about not being heard and really, looking at how you make work meaningful. It's about being heard and contributing, as you've written about so much.

Celine: Do you think a corporate rebel can thrive in an organization or are they doomed to be unhappy and frustrated?

Lois: I think it depends on the organization. If it's a toxic culture, obviously you need to get out of that as fast as you can. But I think it's choosing your battles. You know, you can't solve everything. You can't fix every problem. If you become one of those people who complains about everything or says there's a better way, you'll be miserable and no one will listen to you.

So I think it's really understanding where you can provide the most value and what things you just need to step back from and let someone else fix them or simply decide they're not gonna be the things that you worry about. And I think it's really important to find small moments of joy in your work.

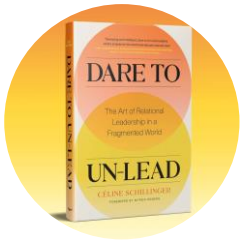
You know, there are a lot of frustrating things about bureaucracy and you know, the latest procurement system you need to use and meetings popping up on your calendar when you feel exhausted already. But what can you do, to really find those moments of joy? It would be mindfulness, to just take a moment to relax, to turn off the worry brain, to turn off the anxiety, and most importantly, to know that you can change things at work, but you can't necessarily change people.

I think when I see people and they're blaming, it's like, "my boss does this", or "my coworker does this", and they build up this narrative of, "it's all everyone else's problem". You will be miserable then.

Celine: Do you think we can make our manager happy, or our manager's manager happy, or HR happy, and bring about change at the same time? Or are they incompatible? What do you recommend?

Lois: I think that it's looking at what's important to the organization, what is valued: that's what people will pay attention to. If it's not valued or important, I would say, you'll be very frustrated and unhappy and you will make other people unhappy. It's really understanding what's possible.

It's presenting ideas as invitations versus threats. I think when our boss or HR feel that they're threatened, they're going to say no, and you will be very unhappy. I think that's important. The spirit in which you do things. If you're a positive person, if you have optimism, if you're kind, you're happy,



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people gravitate to you and they're more likely to say yes. And again, it's because you're not a threat. You know, our brains are wired to look for threats. So if we appear threatening, people are going to shut down before we even have an opportunity to suggest new approaches.

When I think of my career, those times where I was very strident, did not work. And those other initiatives where I thought, well, this is kind of an adventure, let's see what could happen here, and to ask people "how might we do this? How could it be better? How could it be even...?" people like that. You're inviting the collaboration that you [Celine] write about; it's an invitation.

And when you show up that way, our emotions are contagious, so sometimes I think the only way I've changed people is by making this sense of possibility fun, infectious for a team. I mean, it's so simple, but it's amazing what can happen. So even when you say no, if you can say no in a fun way, like, you know, "are you kidding me?" and laugh about it, it changes the environment.

Celine: I wish I had heard those advice earlier on :)

Lois: We all do. I think we look at changes like they're very serious. I'm sure some listeners are in the healthcare field and if their work is about making vaccines, or neuroscience, obviously it is very serious. But for most things in work, it's not life or death. And you know, save that seriousness for when it is life or death.

Celine: I kind of sense that from your earlier responses, but what are the main dangers that change agents face, in your opinion?

Lois: I think one is just complete burnout and stress. And when you get exhausted and when you are so frustrated, your ideas and your creativity actually diminish. Self-care, self-compassion, rest, will make you more creative. It will make you more strategic. That's the biggest thing that I see.

When people get really stressed, I think they begin to alienate people. People just don't even wanna see you. It's like, go away. You know, you're angry, you're bitter.

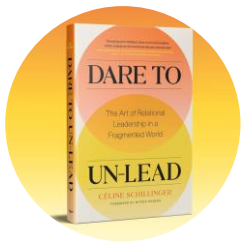
Or people play the victim. "My boss won't let me do this", or "My budget was caught". Poor me, poor me, poor me. And then you're not being effective at all.

Celine: It's also a good excuse sometimes. You have all sorts of impediments. I mean, this narrative where "*we* are not responsible, but *the world* is responsible for not changing". Right?

Lois: Yes. The image I like is if you're pushing a boulder up a hill, and it's huge, and it's not going anywhere, sometimes you just have to step aside and let that boulder go and decide not to worry about it. Let it go. And when I get in situations where I see myself worrying obsessively about an issue or a person... Worry is not a productive behavior. Anxiety is not a productive emotion. I just say to myself "boulder", which is code for, let it go.

I think it's helpful to look at what emotions are driving you and what behaviors are associated. Are they productive and helpful, or are they negative and exhausting?

Celine: I really appreciate that piece of advice. It is very different from the sort of forced happiness that we sometimes feel obliged to in the corporate world, right? This is not the same thing at all.



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Lois: Right. And I think in the corporate world it's important to be able to express (and this gets into constructive or difficult conversations) [what we notice from some] behavior, and how we feel about it and how we would like it to change.

I [had interactions with] someone once and in every conversation we had, she would yawn. I found myself getting very angry and I just said, "every time we are in a conversation, it seems as though you yawn, which makes me feel like you don't care about what I am saying. And it's very irritating to me". And she had no idea, you know? But it's like little things like that where we just have to have those difficult conversations in the corporate world, but do it in being specific, talking about our feelings, asking people for what you would like to see for small changes versus bottling things up.

Celine: That makes me think of the little cartoon where when asked "who wants change?", the whole crowd raises their hand. But when asked "who wants to lead change?", no one does. I actually think this cartoon is a little misleading. The question that really generates change in my opinion, and that few people put their hands up for, is "who is willing to change themselves?" What do you think?

Lois: I think that's huge. We have to always be growing. You know, the world is changing, our environment is changing, and I think changing ourselves and changing a problem at work, it's about curiosity. And changing ourselves is like, why is this situation so annoying to me? Why do I continually get triggered by this individual or this boss? So it's changing yourself and it's also then this sense of curiosity: how, if I approach this differently, might things go? So, yes, we always have to be learning and changing and I think curiosity is the key.

When I look at situations where people want to be rebels or change people, I look at how curious they are about themselves, about other people. And if curiosity isn't there, I know they'll be ineffective. I kind of look at them as "bad rebels" because they're doing it in too narrow of a way. You know, they might have a fixed mindset if they're not curious, and I think curiosity is the great motivator.

Celine: How do you develop that? You are an extremely creative person, so I imagine curiosity comes naturally to you. Can it come naturally to everyone or are there practices to develop it?

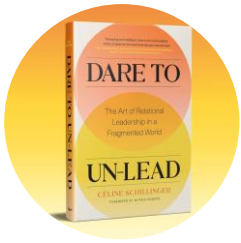
Lois: I think there are practices.

You know, some people collect different things. I collect questions. I think there are good questions that speak to you, that open you up. When I get stuck or I'm starting to feel complacent, I go to some of my questions.

I love the question "what would it take for?" What would it take for me to really get this book idea finished? What would it take for this organization to get one important thing done a year? For me, "what would it take for" is a really helpful question.

The other one that I like is "how could this be even better?" How could this be even better? If you use that in a work situation, it's not coming at it from a negative perspective, but it's a positive one. How could this organization be even better this year? It invites people to think differently versus how do we fix this or what problems are we going to address. So I would say, questions.

And sometimes when people are disagreeing, just look at what's being said and what's being unsaid. Look underneath conversations for what do people really value, what's important to them or not. I



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think those are very helpful. One of the things someone once asked me was “why do your proposals always get bought?” And I said, “well, I listen to what's really important. I listen to what people really value. I listen to what they feel threatened by and how they want to feel.” And I think if we listen to those things, we grow and we provide more value because we understand the situation much better. Does that make sense?

Celine: It does. In addition to your collection of questions, I suppose that the practice of art, like photography or writing, is also extremely important – for you at least, right?

Lois: It is. Those things are also observation. That's why I enjoy them so much. It's being fully present and observing. In some of the writing I haven't released yet, which is more creative writing, I found that what I'm especially good at is where there is dialogue, because I'm always listening.

You know, I like to sometimes go to a restaurant and sit at the bar by myself and listen to conversations. With photography or art, however you see the world, you're fully present seeing it. You're turning off your noisy brain. I think that's important in work too, that we're fully present, not thinking about what we want to say next or what we wanna push forward, but being fully present and listening and really hearing people, I think it can help us move things forward and it can prevent a lot of suffering.

Celine: In the book I quote Donna Lakin who says; “We need to end our romance with leaders”, the romanticization of leadership. Do you feel we romanticize the figure of change makers?

Lois: In many ways we do. I think they're positioned as heroes. And as we know, no one person is responsible for that. But it's just a narrative in our western society about, you know, someone's gonna ride in and save the day.

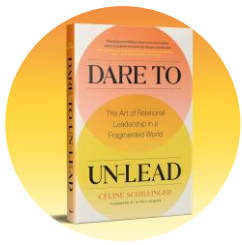
It just doesn't work that way. Also with change makers, it's really a long slog. You've written about that. It's easy to have an idea. But it's very long and challenging to make those ideas real, and it takes many, many people. So, yes, I just don't like the idea of heroes and lone rangers. I think it's dangerous and no one can do it by themselves. It is collaboration. It's inviting people in, and different people contribute different things.

Celine: And it's also joining *other people's* movements or ideas and not just about our own. Right?

Lois: Exactly. Some of the most thrilling things happen when you say, “how can I help?” When some people say, “I don't have any ideas”, I'm like, well, how can you help?

I had a client who was the finance person in the organization. He wasn't the main decision maker, but he was the finance person and he was so helpful in making things happen because he knew how to rearrange budgets and how to get the money. I said, he needs to be on the team because he knows what can be approved, what won't be approved, what quarter we can do whatever. And he said “but I'm not a change agent!”. And I was like, “you most certainly are”. You know, it's not about being the change agent, but being part of the change team.

There are all kinds of roles and we need them all. We need all the personalities and the different ideas. And I even think, I always love and appreciate the naysayers – or people who say why it won't work. And rather than trying to convince them why it will, it's so helpful to listen and ask them “why won't it?” Because they're giving you data that's not always helpful, but many times it is.



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Celine: Amazing. Super useful. What can we do to change ourselves, to change the system (if we take it in that order)? If you agree that's a valuable order to approach things.

Lois: One of the things is – I don't know if this is changing ourselves, but I think it's like: what is easy? What's easy to do? Because when we ourselves can begin to do easy things, and see results, it gives us energy to keep going, and we're learning from that easiness.

It's important to think “how do we make it easy for people to say yes?” One of the things my bosses always said to me, and then my clients, “you make it so easy for me”. So how do we make it easy? How do we have some ease for ourselves?

Again, reframe things so that it's an adventure. I love that whole adventure spirit to things because it's not fixed and it's like in an adventure story, things happen. We've all had those vacations from hell where everything went wrong and those are the things we remember. It was like an adventure, but we figured it out and we have a story to tell.

So I think we can change ourselves by understanding our mindset, by managing our anxiety so that it doesn't manage us. And by always bringing a sense of curiosity to, why did that work? Or why do some people really embrace what I'm saying and other people shut down? What can I learn from that? I really think this curiosity, I know I'm hammering on this, but I think it's so essential to growth. It's so accessible to us. and it helps us in many, many different ways in our lives.

Celine: I love that. Change doesn't have to be necessarily grand and dramatic and painful. Myron Rogers, who is the guest on episode one, speaks about playful tinkering.

Lois: I love that.

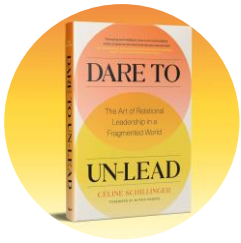
Celine: I do too. Playful tinkering, it's fabulous. Thank you so much, Lois. What would you say to someone who hasn't read *Dare to Un-lead* yet, apart from “read it!”?

Lois: I think what's so valuable about this book is that the context of our world is changing rapidly and in the book you present new leadership principles for a world with a different context from where so many leadership principles are based. I believe we're in a different context of a different time, and we are in a time of rapid change. When people ask, what's your three or five year plan? I burst out laughing because who knows? So, I think your principles open us up to how quickly our world is changing, how much we have to be together in asking “what is it going to take in this moment?”, in inviting people to collaborate together.

I'm so happy to see this breath of fresh air, and the whole notion of unleading and that there's not a leader or a hero or a change agent, we are all in this together. And, in doing it together, that's where the meaning is, and even some of the fun, amid the frustrations that can come.

Celine: Thank you so much, Lois. It was a wonderful conversation. All the links and where people can find you and the titles of your books are posted in the podcast description. It's been an immense pleasure for me, as always, to chat with you, Lois. Let's keep in touch and do that again in the near future.

Lois: Thank you, Celine. Bye.



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Celine: Thank you. Bye.

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!

Podcast Resources

When I found myself somewhat accidentally in the position of corporate rebel, I took it at first somewhat as a game. How to mobilize despite the lack of power and resources? How to overcome the restricted access to the usual communication channels? How to outsmart the old system?

Then when my change work shifted to issues the company considered more strategic, I found myself alone. Enraged at the inability of the corporate 'dinosaurs' to understand the value of my innovative ideas. I didn't realize how much I myself was contributing to the resistance I was encountering. In any case, it was salutary for me at that moment to meet people like Lois Kelly; otherwise, I probably would have fallen into sad bitterness and a downward spiral of ineffectiveness.

Lois Kelly is an author, artist, leadership advisor and former corporate executive. She and former CIA executive Carmen Medina are the founders of the [Rebels at Work](#) initiative. Lois brings to the cause - supporting rebels to succeed - her creative sensibilities, strong pragmatism, insightful judgment and deep familiarity with leadership. She is a profoundly inspiring person to me, whose wise counsel at the most critical times has been instrumental. Hear the good news, corporate changemakers: the journey of change can be one of positive impact, recognition and joy. Let's go!

Curious to know more?

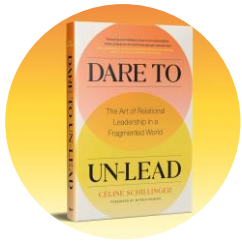
Read [Dare To Un-Lead: The Art of Relational Leadership in a Fragmented World](#).

Lois Kelly, Carmen Medina and more rebels can be found in Dare To Un-Lead:

- Lois Kelly, pp. 80, 83
- Carmen Medina, pp. 80, 99, 206
- Rebels at Work, pp. 71, 80, 86
- Corporate Rebels United, pp. 71, 86
- Change Agents Worldwide, p. 71

The topic of change agents is addressed throughout the book, and in particular:

- Change agents, 65–88
- Agency and action, 80–82;



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- Author's costs and freedoms as, 75–76;
- Author's journey as, 67–75;
- Awakening to possibility, 67–69;
- Beginning with oneself, 88, 102–3;
- Breaking down imposed barriers, 73–75;
- Creating more change, 72–73;
- Finding inspiration and support, 69–72;
- Personal traits of, 82–83;
- Positive illusions and, 83;
- Practices for nurturing and self protection, 78–79, 86–88;
- Resistance and self-sabotage, 76–78, 83–84, 85–86;
- Rocking the boat, 80

Read Lois Kelly's books (I love them so much!)

- [Rebels at Work: A Handbook for Leading Change from Within](#) - with [Carmen Medina](#), et al. (2014)
- [Naked Hearted: How Bullshit, Parkinson's and John Lennon Changed My Life](#) (2015)
- [Be the Noodle: 50 Ways To be A Compassionate, Courageous, Crazy-Good Caregiver](#) - with Kathryn Dreier (2020)

Read these two related blog posts

- [What Happened at Courage Camp](#)
- [Regain Freedom at Work](#)

Find inspiration from Rebels at Work <https://www.rebelsatwork.com/>

Watch Carmen Medina and Lois Kelly's keynotes <https://www.rebelsatwork.com/resources>

Connect with Lois Kelly on [Twitter](#) and on [LinkedIn](#)

Curious to use these ideas in your work? Get in touch!

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