DARE TO UN-LEAD

The Art of Relational Leadership in a Fragmented World

The Podcast

Listen to the podcast on all good platforms and on WeNeedSocial.com

Episode 8 – Sharon O'Dea

Social Collaboration at Work:
Digital Communicator Sharon O'Dea

So. many. workplace tools. For better work, really? Or mental overload, suboptimal productivity, disengagement? Sharon O'Dea has immersed herself in online communications since she was a teenager. Now an award-winning digital strategist and a powerful voice on effective communications, Sharon explains what it takes to foster effective collaboration and create an optimal employee experience. An experience that is enhanced, not ruined, by digital tools.
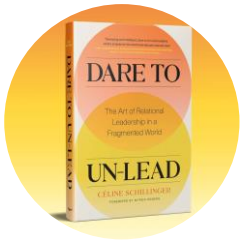
Podcast Transcript

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 eighth episode of the Dare to Un-Lead podcast, where we explore with selected guests some of the key topics addressed in *Dare to Un-Lead*, the book!

The world of work and leadership is in crisis because its fundamentals inherited from Taylorism, rooted in archaic beliefs about leaders and authority, do not work as well anymore. We set the

scene in the first two episodes of the podcast, and then we delved into values around which we can reinvent a better practice of leadership: better for people, and for business. From episodes three to five, the notions of power dynamics, constructive rebellion and digital empowerment helped us understand the effects of greater liberty at work.

We then turn to equality with Susan Scrupski advocating in episode six for equal respect across our diversity. In episode seven, Jon Husband and Harold Jarche explained how democratic networks make knowledge flow and grow trust. But how do we use networks at work in practice? This is what, as a closing discussion on the principle of equality, we are about to address now.

My guest today is Sharon O'Dea, a digital strategist, an experienced web professional, an award-winning entrepreneur specializing in digital workplace and strategy, who has lived and worked on three continents. She is a talented communicator, a writer, an acclaimed speaker, a researcher, a geek, a top influencer in the future of work and much more. Sharon is the co-founder of Lithos Partners, a boutique digital communication and collaboration consultancy.

I *love* her presence on social media. How I wish I had her sense of words! Sharon's posts are witty, clever, varied and funny. They can be brave too. She doesn't hesitate to assert positions, which for a woman in particular, on the internet, is not always easy.

Whether she posts pictures of Amsterdam where she lives, or of a white sandy beach where she was on a vacation, or whether she challenges a large enterprise on its hypocrisy regarding fair pay across genders, Sharon always does so with finesse and humor. No wonder why her fan club on social media has grown so big. And if you were drawn to her because she's funny, you will stay because Sharon's jolly character rests on a lot of substance, a strong sense of purpose, and a deep understanding of relational dynamics at work in an era of social media.

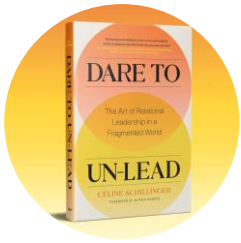Sharon, I'm so glad you could come. Welcome!

Sharon: Thank you for having me. I really enjoyed the book. I really am looking for the opportunity to dive into it.

Celine: Super.

Sharon: And thank you for a very flattering introduction!

Celine: :) Sharon, let me start with the very first question I ask all my guests. What is your art, the professional practice that you would describe as unique to you or that you perform in a unique way? What is your art and what led you to it?

Sharon: Like everything in my life, I think where I've ended up is [the result of] a series of happy accidents. I've never been of the kind of forward planning, and I thought really hard about how to answer this question. Thankfully, I'd have some pre-warning from listening to your earlier episodes. Actually, I think the thing that makes me different is my ability to navigate complex organizations.

Like you, I've worked in many of them over the years, in banking and government and hospital sector.

And actually, trying to make things happen inside complex organizations is itself a skill. You need to understand the dynamics of many of the things *you*'ve talked about, about power, but also about some of the very real barriers that exist. And those could be regulatory, but they're often to do with culture or practice or expectation. And actually, when you're delivering good programs or making any sort of change happen inside organizations, you have to base it in the reality of how it currently works.

I know perhaps the startup space, they often sneer at the corporate sector, you know, why does nothing happen? It's because there are real barriers making things happen in large organizations. So, when I work with banks or with big corporate organizations, actually, it's working within those boundaries and the reality of how they currently exist. And I think that where I've managed to provide my little niche is being able to make real change happen inside complex organizations and understanding the needs of complex organizations.

Celine: Sharon, you won an award 10 days ago. That's one more to your already impressive collection, but this one is a bit special, right? What is it about?

Sharon: Oh yeah! So, I did standup comedy for the very first time. It was a PowerPoint based comedy night, very near where I live in Amsterdam at the Boom Chicago Comedy Club.

And I was really proud, but also surprised that I won Best Act because it was my first time ever doing anything like this. But the reason I did it is that I think comedy would be funny and I do a lot of PowerPoint, so I figured I could bring those two things together.

But actually, part of what I tell other people is: this stuff is tough! Standing in front of other people and telling your story, making your voice heard and being present and being visible is difficult. But it gets easier the more you do it, when you kind of learn to live with the emotions, feel your feelings. And yet, it's terrifying. And I'm like, okay, well, I tell other people.

So, I have a little initiative [300 Seconds] I've spun up outside work, which is about helping women in other underrepresented groups, particularly in technology and digital, to find their voice and tell their story. I always tell other people, just go and do it. Do it for five minutes, then next time do it for 10. And the next time, before you know it, a bit like me, the first time I did it, I was terrified. And now I stand in front of 200 people in a comedy club and try and make them laugh. And as with all these things, it's all about practice, but it's also all about, it's okay to be scared about it. It's okay to feel nervous, but go with it and eventually you get better at it and you've got more comfortable with doing it as well.

So that was why I did it, and hopefully other people found me funny.
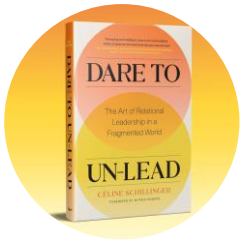
DARE TO UN-LEAD

The Art of Relational Leadership in a Fragmented World

The Podcast

Celine: Someone on social media in the comments asked, what was next for you? Fighter pilot, high wire walking, any such plans?

Sharon: Well definitely the fighter pilot is out because I'm partially sighted. That prevents me from ever having a pilot's license. It's about the only thing I am barred from doing! So well, definitely not a fighter pilot – and if you'd ever seen me play video games, you probably wouldn't get in any kind of vehicle with me.

I'm sure that person was joking, but actually it is unusual when you get to our middle stage of life to genuinely do new things and learn new things. But it's weirdly rewarding whenever I do it. You know, I've moved to a new country. I'm learning a new language. I've pushed myself out there and learned to do comedy. Actually, you can still learn new things at every stage of life. And I think that has been an important lesson for me over particularly the last few years, to grow in that way.

Celine: That's amazing. Your LinkedIn bio states that you are passionate about the power of social web to drive positive change of services, organizations, and communities. What do you mean? What is the kind of positive change you have in mind?

Sharon: You touched on quite a lot of this in the book actually, around when we work as networks as opposed to working in hierarchy, we can identify new opportunities, identify new ways of doing things.

I know from my experience working with organizations of all sizes, that once you start to build those communities, you can start to share ideas and to build best practices. And that could be within your local community, I've seen it in that context, it can be across a cause, maybe globally. But inside organizations, particularly when we do build and use our networks effectively, we're able to identify better ways of doing things. We're able to speed up our processes, we're able to think at scale and tap into new knowledge and ideas in ways that simply aren't possible in the old ways of work.

So, I match, I'm just really nerdy about that kind of thing. I came of age just as social networks are coming into being, the very early social networks. They've always been part of who I am. I was probably on the social web before it was really even called that, in the early, early bulletin board kind of days.

I've always been fascinated by the opportunity they present to connect people with ideas and to connect people with opportunities and to inspire people to tap into something bigger than themselves. And I think that's a huge opportunity for organizations

Celine: Sharon, do you feel the web is still social? Haven't advertising, algorithms, monopolies, polarization and disinformation warfare, just to name a few, crushed the original hopes associated with social media? Is it behind us or is it still present? And what keeps you hopeful if you still are?

Sharon: That is a really, really good question.
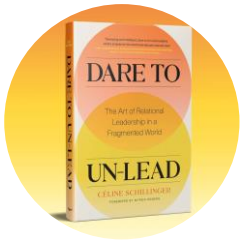
And I'm sure by the time [this episode] comes out in a week or so, things will have changed. But I've been watching the backlash on Twitter, in particular the current chaos that's reining there. And actually, it's been quite interesting to see that they're trying to impose those top-down dynamics and there's always been a really strong fight against that, and that has made me surprisingly positive about the future of the social web.

I'm not necessarily positive about the future of Twitter. But that need to connect away from those corporate interests has really strongly come through in a way that perhaps it didn't six months ago.

Those challenges that you raised though are real. We must recognize that freedom on the web is absolutely not a given and that some voices are always going to be amplified more than others. And we can see that in really draconian ways in places like in China and other places where your access to the web is more restricted. And also, your ability to pay to be heard. It is becoming increasingly clear that not all voices are equal online. But I remain positive insofar as the democratization of the web has not gone away.

And surprisingly, some of the recent activity on Twitter has almost reminded me of that need, that people's need to connect and to share will always be greater, and there will always be ways to fight that.

Celine: Sharon, let's turn to the workplace. What is, in your opinion, an optimal digital employee experience? How would you describe that? What does it take for an organization to provide that kind of experience and what does it gain from it?
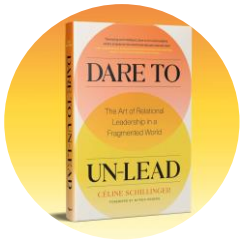
Sharon: You've got some great questions.

Celine: I thought about them! [laughter]

Sharon: For me, the optimal employee experience is about providing a good quality user experience in terms of how you interact with work. And that, to me, is mostly about hiding complexity.

We often deal with so many different systems at work – and there's an increasing number of them. In the past it used to be that "IT buys systems and you use them". Now, with software as a service, every department buys its own product or services or whatever apps it might use, and then expects the employee to go and navigate around all of them.

And that creates unnecessary complexity, a lot of cognitive load, but also just a lot of confusion about where you go, what you do, which we don't experience elsewhere. As we move to new ways of working, where we work primarily online, our primary experience of work is the digital one, and often that can be quite poor.

There is a huge disconnect between the brand promise at work and our experience of the tools that we need. And that's just about the transactional layer. There is a need, within that transactional

layer, [to improve] how we get work done: the mechanics of doing work as well as being able to do our workplace admin.

But then there's also about how we connect and communicate. And again, this can be overly complex, there's a lack of clarity about how you do things, what's the process and stuff. So, for me, I guess the optimal experience is one that is designed around the employees and their needs to get things done with that: to connect, collaborate, communicate, to share, to build a network, to build trust, and there is clarity about how you do that; there is a good quality experience in doing that.

There shouldn't be unnecessary barriers to doing any of the things that you need to do at work. Chief amongst those is the ability to work with other people, because none of us work alone.

So actually, I guess this is a very long-winded way of saying we need to focus much more on the individuals who are doing the work, and as organizations we have a tendency to focus on individual departments or services and how they deliver things. We need to change that balance so it's much more around that user-centered thinking, and also group-centered thinking, I suppose.

Celine: You specialize in intranets and digital workplace technologies, employee experience and the future of work, social media and content strategy, digital innovation, and transformation. What does your work look like in practice?

Sharon: Generally speaking, I tend to work with about two, sometimes three clients at a time. My business partner and I do quite a lot of discovery projects in particular. We tend to work with organizations who recognize that their employee experience, their internal comms could be better, but they don't know specifically how.

So, often we will do quite a lot of identifying some of the barriers to effective communication, collaboration. They can be technology barriers, but often they're much more related to barriers of practice, of usage, of expectation and of experience. We will often work with organizations to identify what their needs are.

Not just what their needs are *today*, but recognizing that work itself is changing. With intranets, digital workplaces, even the fast ones, you're going to take a good year to roll something out. So, we need to think about the workforce, not where it is today, but where it will be in a year when you finish rolling something out.

Also, these programs tend to stay in place for four, five years. So where will it be at that time? The workforce is changing quite a lot, so how do we build in the capacity to change as well within that? So, our work involves quite a lot of research, quite a lot of talking to key stakeholders, but also helping people to identify what the potential range of options are that they could take. And that could be around new platforms and technologies. It could be around using the platforms and technologies they currently have, in better ways. Or it could also be about more supporting activity around the kind of content, training, coaching and maybe around the kind of leadership as well.
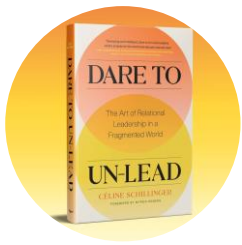
Celine: Have you seen a qualitative leap, a quantum leap on these subjects since the pandemic? Has your work radically changed since then, or not so much?

Sharon: It's quite interesting. What I found in the early stages of the pandemic is, there obviously was this huge leap forward in the use of collaboration tools.

We had no tools. People were sent home. What was quite interesting is that most organizations already had the right tools. They just weren't already using them in a particularly useful way. Now, what tends to happen when we do change, is we tell people about the change, we give them the reasons for the change and then we make the change.

What happened in the pandemic is that we made the change, and then people had to get used to the why and the how, so it was the opposite way round from our usual kind of planned change curve. What we're now finding, is that on the one hand, suddenly everyone recognizes how important for work this technology is – I think great for work in general and great for me as a business. Fantastic.
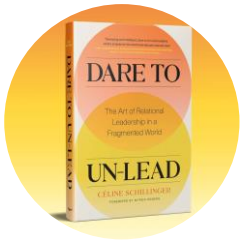
But actually, a lot of the work we're doing is almost unpicking the damage. Obviously, we had no choice. People had to go and keep the engine running as it were, but it's suboptimal. We know that we need to fix some of the practices. So actually, quite a lot of the work that I'm doing lately has been really focused on understanding how tools are currently used and what's suboptimal about that, around the kind of Teams usage.... Often, we find that organizations will have kind of a social network like Yammer, Viva Engage, but they haven't worked out what they're using it for and they could be using it a lot better. And at the same time, there are gaps in how they communicate and collaborate.

So, it's almost having to go back and do the strategy that you would've done early on; but with the adoption curve already completed, if that makes sense. There's a lot of, let's go back and relearn, or actually borrowing your phrase, "unlearn" how to use these [tools] and learn again around how we might make ourselves more visible, more open, more collaborative, using the tools that we already have. Rather than, in the past, quite a lot of the work I did tended to be building a business case for investment in a new platform and that turns out to happen a lot less now.

Celine: Typically, what makes an organization realize they have a problem and reach out to you?

Sharon: I'd love to say that it's because they've got low engagement scores, and that is sometimes the case, but generally, realistically, they're driven by their broader business objective, as it should be. You know, is there a reputational or operational risk attached to your failure to act?

We know that when you're working in a corporate, it's really if they're going either to lose money or fail or miss an opportunity, that's when you know there is a much sharper focus on their need to make these things happen more effectively. So, it tends to be less the attrition, but more of the recognizing the potential opportunity cost of failing threats.

The other thing I'm finding is we are still in a really, really tight labor market, and what people are recognizing is that the world of work is changing and what we've failed to do a lot of the time is make our ways of working catch up with the reality of how work has changed. It's not just about working from home and hybrid work, but actually the fundamentals of work. The relationship between people and work is changing. It's becoming less characterized by loyalty, but much more transactional. People have portfolio careers, they may do two or three jobs at the same time, and that didn't used to be the case in the past.

People's tenure with organizations has shrunk. People do short term contracts and there is a need to get people up to speed much more quickly. I've heard of one organization recently that found that its time to full productivity was 18 months, but the average tenure was 12 months. So, on average, people were unproductive, which is an unhelpful place to be. How can we narrow that? If we recognize the reality that people are going to cycle in and out of organizations much more quickly, we need them to be productive in a month or two months. Employee experience is really central to that. I need to hit the ground running and find the things that I need to do and be able to connect and be productive, as soon as possible. We can't wait 18 months in the new reality of work.

Celine: And it's not enough to adopt tools like Microsoft Teams or other videoconference or instant messaging systems, to claim "We are a social organization", right?
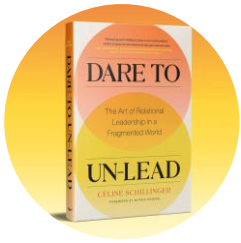
Sharon: Absolutely. I really love this as a theme in your book. It's actually about your ability to tap into the network. And the longer you're with an organization, the more of the network you have. So how do we enable people to tap into the network faster? We know that the longer you are somewhere, the more you'll know who to ask or who will know who to ask. That's not scalable.

So, how do we create scalable networks that can be activated at speed? That's where, yes, the tools are important, but actually so is the culture. And also, people have to navigate – that's one of the things you've pointed to – this power dynamic. People are given the agency to tap into the network as well in order to be productive, be collaborative, to share their ideas, to contribute

Celine: Thinking about tools, and how tools shape behaviors, do you see closed / private / permission-based online communities as a second best solution, after open communities? Or as a step in the right direction? Or as something that slows down the cultural evolution towards a networked way of work?

Sharon: This is going to be such a consultant answer, but the answer is of course, it depends.

I like to believe that when you work with big, especially complex organizations in regulated sectors, you have to work within the realities of how they work. And there are reasons that you need information walls. For example, when Facebook launches its Workplace product, they like that everything should be open for everyone. Well, that's nice in theory, but that's just not going to land in an organization like this one or that one.

And the reality is there are reasons for that, some of them being regulatory reasons, and some others being kind of imaginary cultural reasons, but we have to work within the reality of how those organizations work. So, depending on their appetite, their ability to change, yes, in theory, I think everything should be as open as it is appropriate for it to be.

But that isn't always appropriate for everyone, and I think we have to recognize that some sharing is better than none, and that we are working on that part. Then sometimes it's not appropriate to be open to everyone, and that's also okay too.

As an example, I did a piece of work with Barnardo's, the UK's biggest children charity about four or five years ago now, and we ended up with a really radical change to them, which was just to put their entire intranet on the web.

The reason for that was that their people are really busy: they're working with troubled families, some of them in very dangerous situations. They don't have time to go through three layers of logging on their trips. They need to get the answer and get away again quickly. So, things that we did were, how can we make the answers as easy to read as possible and quick in time as possible? But also, actually, let's just be open about what we're doing. If someone wants to "steal" their child protection policy, then good! They're really proud of it. It's about that commitment to transparency. But that works in their context. In another, of a bank for example, absolutely not. They would never do that and there are good reasons for that.

So actually, when we are thinking about our networks and our information, my answer is probably let's make things as open as they can be. But recognizing that that isn't always open to everyone.

Celine: Talking about networks, do you think they can thrive in an organization that has an autocratic culture? What do you do when you're confronted with a network-*unfriendly* management culture?

Sharon: That's a really tricky one. The reality is, it's difficult to make official networks work. Actually, there are two answers to this question.

Where you have organizations that don't… When leaders aren't committed to it or don't give at least tacit permission for people to communicate and to network, then people will not do so in an open and visible way.

We all know that adage, if your manager participates in it, you'll do it. It gives you some sort of permission to do it. And what we often find is you get nodes within the network who are actually really, really active and make things happen, often to the distrust of their own manager.

It particularly happens to women, I find. Those younger women who will then make themselves really visible in their internal network or externally, and then find that they get pushback from senior management because they're more visible:
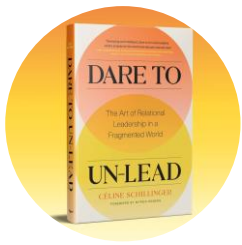
"How do they even know who *you* are and they don't know who *I* am?"

"Well, that's because I've made the effort to make myself known!"

…and these power dynamics start to come through.

To go back to my earlier outset, if you don't have those sort of more formal or official networks, they'll still exist because people have a fundamental innate need to connect and to share. So what you end up with instead are multiple, unofficial networks and they might exist on WhatsApp, they may exist on companies tools you don't know about. They're under the radar. They are happening on that little instance of Slack you don't think about too often.

So, yes, absolutely. If management or senior leadership do not actively participate or encourage this, they won't make it go away. They just make it hide.

Celine: I had another question that may relate to that one, to or to the answer you just gave, but I'm going to ask you anyway.
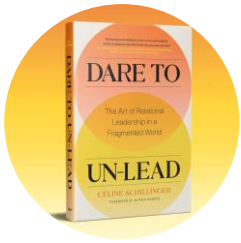
Many people, especially young people, want a more egalitarian work culture. They dislike domination, relationships, and excessive control. And our work contributes to this new culture, so it's great. But as strategic consultants, we are contracted by those in power, right? Those who hold the budgets. Who do not necessarily want to release control to interact transparently in a social network, or to share power. Are you confronted with this paradox? And if so, how do you solve it?

Sharon: This is something that I think has been bubbling under for about 10 years now. There is a fundamental disconnect between our expectations of agency or having a voice as citizens, but particularly as consumers. And if you've grown up in a consumer society, which is pretty much everyone under about 50 now, where you have almost infinite choice in all things, and suddenly you come to work and you don't; you don't have choice over what you do, what tools you use, you don't have a huge amount of choice over how you get things done, you might need to follow fixed processes depending on the type of role that you have. There is a disconnect there that I think that is growing over time.

It is a challenge that we are coming across, and it is actually a challenge to the fundamentals of collaboration as well.

On the one hand, we give people company-provided tools and tell them that we need them to use that, and that's a good reason for that. We need people to collaborate in the same place in order to get some of that value out of it.

But then, we take away some of the agency that people have to make choices about how they get things done. There is a disconnect there, I think. But it is one that is starting to become more apparent as people want to make much more active choices about the work that they do, their need

to connect with organizational purpose, to have a lot more choice about when and where they work and, and how they get work done and their freedom to associate at work as well and to have a voice.

So, there's definitely a growing expectation gap between an organizational need to control and an employee's need for greater agency.

Celine: Do you feel leadership teams, or buyers, are more open to new perspectives on power sharing and all the other consequences of these new social tools?

Sharon: Frankly no. I feel the reality is, people here are at the top of the pyramid, they got where they are in the old system as it were, so they over-indexed some of its benefits because it worked for them. I think that's increasingly becoming challenging over time, as newer generations come into the workplace. We're probably not far off from being a four generational workforce, as Gen Z starts to join. We are starting to see that tension there between what people's expectations are and that of maybe the more senior levels of leadership in terms of how work can be, to a degree, a democracy.

Celine: I heard you refer to the importance of governance a few times. Can you give an example of some un-adapted governance that prevented adoption of social tools in an organization or, on the contrary, of a positive change in governance that unlocked adoption?

Sharon: One organization that I worked with, I think they'd had Yammer for a good few years, but like a lot of organizations have Yammer and they've not quite worked out what it was for, what needs it served, you know, like a lot of things that's in their Microsoft mix. People generally got the idea that enabling this suite of tools was a good idea, but they hadn't quite worked out giving it some clear purpose.

In this organization we did a little bit of work with them to, as I often do, identify barriers to communication. This is an analogy I overuse, but one of the things that I find when I work with organizations is that, I feel like in a murder trial, there'll be three things that a jury will look for when they try to convict the accused.
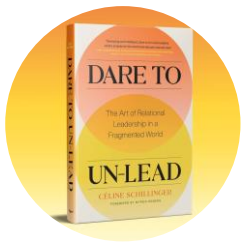
That is, does the person have the means, motive, and opportunity to participate?

The means is, do they have specifically access to committing the crime, in this instance, to participate in on your social network?

The opportunities: do they have time to do it? You know, were you available on that day?

And then the other is of course, motive.

Often what I found is, three of those are missing, but often it's two. What we've had in this case is there was a disconnect between giving people the principle of being able to participate but not giving many of their workers an actual window in their day in which they were to do it.

So actually from a governance perspective, we actually have to think about: how do we free up people to do that? And that could be ensuring that they have an adequate opportunity to participate, which actually meant having a lot less control over people's time, and ensuring that people had the ability to choose to participate at a time of their own choosing, because you can't tell people have 10 minutes to go and participate on the social network because it simply doesn't work that way. You need to do it when you feel like doing it, or it isn't social.

And what it meant, we had to talk to that organization about rethinking some of the control they had around individuals and how they manage their day, or this kind of social connection simply wouldn't happen. So, within this particular audience group, which made up quite a lot of their workforce, we recognized that if they wanted to have the benefits of becoming social, we had to actually rethink some of the rules they had around individual behaviors and time management.

Celine: About 10 years ago, I remember a common objection to using internal social networks at work was, I don't have time, or this is only for people who have time to spare. Do you still hear this objection often?

Sharon: Oh, absolutely. I often find that when you do network analysis on some of this, you identify some internal influencers. They are people who spend quite a lot of time on that, but they often generate a huge amount of value. But it does tend to be a flashpoint.
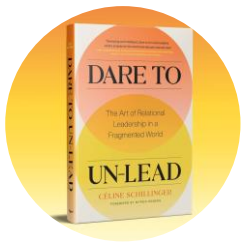
You'll have internal experts and they're often internal experts on something really specific. They can answer your questions on, like an internal system that a lot of people use, but they're the organization nerds on it. That person is probably saving the help desk thousands of hours a year with their contribution. And there will be others who are connected, they're nodes, they know who to get from one person to the other. But it is a very common objection, which is if that person's got so much time to be on there, or are they doing their job properly, it's something I absolutely still hear.

Again, it can be a flashpoint between individuals and managers. Thinking about some of the points that you raised in the book around power dynamics. A lot of middle managers love to act, or instinctively want to act as gatekeepers of information. The social network stops them being that gatekeeper because people can access individuals or can access information as and when they wish.

Often more information than their manager or leader may have. So, some of those objections about time are actually, when you dig out, objections to challenging their role as a gatekeeper.

Celine: Absolutely. A final question about the workplace. In your work practice with clients, are you tool agnostic, or do you have a preference for some tools – as if we had a choice really, given the dominant position from one of the players as we know. What is your position on that?

Sharon: I and we as Lithos Partners are very strictly tool agnostic and platform agnostic. As you know, there is a big dominant player in the market, but that doesn't mean that there aren't myriad ways to augment that particular [suite]. Lots of organizations are Microsoft SharePoint houses and for good reasons. But that doesn't mean that…

There's a very vast ecosystem of tools that you can use alongside, that can improve your experience in multiple ways. For some organizations that's right; and still in other organizations we do recommend non-Microsoft solutions. They do still exist. And they're appropriate in certain contexts. It does feel a bit… There's a lot of consolidation happening within the market generally, and I suspect we're gonna see a lot more of that over the years ahead. Small example, we're soon to support Beebo, in order to have more of a holistic kind of employee experience offering.

I get the sense we're probably going to see a lot more of that over the coming years. But at the moment there is actually a fairly thriving market in tools and platforms across the collaboration and communication space. And yes, Microsoft is the dominant there, but there is still a lot of choice out there.

Celine: Now moving away from the workplace, and that will be one of my last questions to you, Sharon: how easy is it to be a woman with an opinion on the internet? Any advice you would give to other women?

Sharon: Oh, that's a really good question. I think I'm in a relatively privileged position in that I don't work for a big company. When I did, I used to keep a lot more of my opinions under wraps. Originally, I worked for the government, so it was actually in my contract. I wasn't allowed to have an opinion on anything political or even that could be considered political in the public arena.
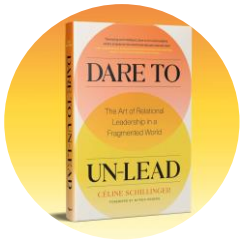
And then I went to work for a big bank, and you can make assumptions about the politics: a lot of people who work in banks tend to be quite conservative. And I'm generally not. So, it took me a little while to get used to having the opportunity to have a voice on the internet.

Now I love it, but I also feel like I can use that privilege on behalf of others that maybe don't have the freedom to act in the same way that I do. But it's difficult. There's lots of studies that show that women on the internet are more likely to receive abuse. I tend to just mute and block liberally on all social networks. You know, you have an absolute right to say what you like. I am under no obligation to read any of it. And I think that's the only way in which you can maintain your sanity on the internet - when you have a relatively strongly held opinion.

Celine: Wonderful. So now is my last question to you, Sharon. What would you say to someone who hasn't read *Dare to Un-Lead* yet, apart from "read it!"?

Sharon: So, I really enjoyed this book. I thought it really challenged a lot of my thinking, even as someone who's worked with a lot of corporates. But the thing that I really enjoyed about it is, I am I guess a slightly frustrated academic under the surface and I really enjoyed quite how well referenced and researched it was, both from the conversations with practitioners, but also its theoretical underpinning and some of the literature.

I don't read a lot of business books, but this felt like it had a really nice, kind of solid base of theory, but it's also speaking to practitioners about their real experiences and challenging some of our

expectations around leadership, and particularly in the corporate space. So, I feel it is well worth reading and I very much recommend it.

Celine: Thank you Sharon! It's been a real pleasure and a wonderful opportunity for me and our listeners to know you better and to know about your work. All references and links to videos, books, articles, social media references will be posted in the podcast notes. I thank you so much, it's been great and I will keep following you with a lot of enthusiasm on social networks. Thank you, Sharon.

Sharon: Likewise. Thank you so much for having me on and thank you for many years of good conversation across the social network.

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!
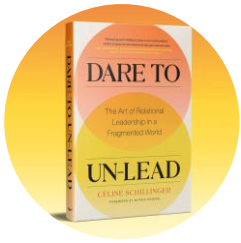
Podcast Resources

Since the beginning of my journey as a corporate change agent, digital tools have been a huge help: tools to easily express yourself without intermediaries or asking for permission; tools to create and share stories, visuals, and compelling testimonials; and, of course, tools to connect with other people. What better way to learn, innovate, and create collective value than through collaboration?

That's why I've long been frustrated by the reluctance of organizations and their leaders to really embrace the use of internal social networks, for example. These are too often seen as an afterthought at best, and a waste of time at worst. Someday I'll have to tell the story of the internal mobilization campaign I was part of, in response to my employer's plan to shut down the company social network ;)

Now, when it comes to compliance and productivity, companies have naturally increasingly equipped their employees with digital tools. The cloud technology revolution, supply chain disruptions, the covid experience, have all been huge accelerators of digital. So much so that today, it is not rare to complain about the overabundance of tools. According to a study quoted by Sharon O'Dea, the average back-office worker has about 90 applications at his or her disposal and uses an average of 35 of them in a single shift! But does this abundance really foster good work, collective intelligence, innovation and value creation? Have we really made progress on the collaboration front?

You've heard Sharon's views in this episode. What are yours? Any advice you would share?

Curious to know more?

Read *Dare To Un-Lead: The Art of Relational Leadership in a Fragmented World*

- The topic of **collaboration** is addressed throughout the book, and in particular on pp. 20, 152–53, 204–5. See also cooperation, networks
- **Corporate communications** is addressed in pp. 54, 63, 208–9, 231. See also information and data; social media
- On **social networking tools**: pp. 177–79
- On **social media**: pp. 70–71, 73, 141, 160–61, 222, 248–49

Learn about *300 Seconds* – Sharon's initiative in favor of public speaking skills in under-represented populations, to increase a diversity of perspectives in digital conferences

Run the DWXS survey among your employees to collect their insights and improve your digital workplace

Watch and learn more about Sharon in this conversation with Tom McCallum on WhatComesNext.Live

Watch Sharon speak with Hanna Karppi about human-centred future of work (Camp Digital 2022)

Read about Sharon's views on AI here

Connect with Lithos Partners

Get in touch with Sharon O'Dea on her website and on Twitter and LinkedIn and Instagram

Read my 2019 piece in Forbes: "3 Ways Social Media Make You A Better Leader"

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

Meet me on

Twitter

Mastodon

LinkedIn

Instagram

YouTube

Amazon