



## Leadership in a Changing World with Flex Author, Jeffrey Hull



Flex is not like most leadership books. In it, Jeffrey Hull proposes new principles for effective leadership in a changing business landscape.



**Jeffrey Hull**

**James:** James Schramko here, welcome back to SuperFastBusiness.com. This is Episode 821. Today we're going to be talking about team, leadership, etc. I've brought along Jeffrey Hull, welcome to the call.

**Jeffrey:** Thank you. Happy to be here.

**James:** I wonder, like, are you a doctor or professor? Often there's little extra acronyms in those names that I miss.

**Jeffrey:** Technically, I'm both.

**James:** Why not? That's very impressive. Now you have a bestselling book called Flex. I'm going to read this. The Art and Science of Leadership in a Changing World. So you've got lots and lots of experience, 20 years' experience; you've partnered with c-suite executives, high performance leadership organizational strategy.

And this is a topic we love at SuperFastBusiness. Bulk of our audience have a team or should have a team. I'm not really that into the solopreneur movement. Solopreneur, for example, in our industry, they talk about a person who's an entrepreneur, they don't work for anyone else, but they literally do everything in their business. So for me, that's just a job with a different employer, yourself. And what we're really focused on is helping people get out of that.

I've got a book somewhere around here called [Work Less Make More](#). And one of the big keys I give away is you got to have a team. Like, you can hire people, they'll actually sell you their time - you could call it a job or employment or contract or whatever - and give you that time back.

So we're constantly talking about leadership and team. It's my observation that not many people get this right. It's actually difficult. It's not like we're born leaders.

So firstly, I'll give a little bit of background to you, and you can fill in any gaps. But you're an educator, you're Director of Education at the Institute of Coaching, a Harvard Medical School affiliate. You're clinical instructor in psychology at Harvard Medical School, and adjunct professor of leadership at New York University. That's like just, you know, mind-blowingly impressive to me.

And you've shared secret strategies, science underlining your client successes, and the book's got life stories and evidence-based research. This is the thing that's often missing in my world, where anyone can pull up a course or a membership or start coaching.

I'm probably an example of that. I don't have a degree, I never finished university, I did one semester of marketing and didn't finish. So we're in this different zone now, where there's probably a lot of information out there, a lot of styles and so forth.

Now, I think some of the people who I learned from 20 years ago did have an education, and were the industry leaders in it. And I've passed on the baton, to some extent, but I want to bring in some real science-backed, evidence-based research to add in here. It's my duty to look after our audience as best we can.

You seem like you're pretty qualified, from what I'm reading here. You've also got a nice acronym, F.I.E.R.C.E. That actually describes one of my past bosses, by the way; it stands for flexibility, intentionality, emotional intelligence, realness, collaboration, and engagement. So we might touch on some of that.

But you got a lot of talking points here that I was just really attracted to, that your assistant kindly sent here about leadership models, the alpha leader - oh, I'm just looking forward to that one. And just getting real about cultivating authentic leadership. So I'm not going to give away the whole bag of tricks here. But what I do want to do is just say, welcome to SuperFastBusiness, Professor, Dr. Jeffrey Hull, let's have a discussion about leadership.

### **Because leading isn't just for old white guys**

And why don't we start off with, what has been the most surprising thing for you since you published your book, the feedback that you get?

**Jeffrey:** Well, first of all, let me say thank you for having me. I'm excited to be having a conversation with you and to get a chance to talk to your audience. I've listened to a number of your podcasts and I think they're really, really interesting and provocative, which is always cool, the best part.

The feedback from my book, I think, is hearing from the folks who say, Oh my god, I'm so glad somebody wrote a leadership book that's not about old white guys. It's like, It's a book about me, you know? It's a book about people of all different demographics, people of color, lots of female leaders.

You know, what I really wanted to do was to pull back the covers of what's really happening, and as I said in the title, the landscape of leadership, which is that so many more interesting people are stepping up to lead these days. And they're doing it very effectively. And they're having a huge impact.

So you know, they write to me, and they say, Wow, I feel like you wrote this book for me. And that's the greatest gratification you could ever get.

**James:** Yeah, it's a direct hit. I mean, if you take a cross sample of society, like when I get off the airplane from Australia, into the United States, I immediately notice, like, I'm in a different culture here - lots of different colors, lots of different sizes and shapes and stuff than what we see here. Like, I guess, we have a really multicultural society, but we have, like, a mixed bag of everything. You've definitely got some very strong core representations.

## **The emergence of beta leadership**

But would you say that most people don't realize they have potential for leadership, that they somehow feel like that's someone else?

**Jeffrey:** Well, I'll answer that question by jumping right into what you mentioned in the outset around the alpha. Right?

**James:** Yeah.

**Jeffrey:** Because what I write about in depth in the book is the research that I did, that is what I call the emergence of a beta leadership style. And the reason I bring that up in the context of your question is that it's not so much that a lot of the people, historically, a lot of folks didn't think of themselves as a leader, or were reluctant to take on leadership roles. The issue is that they thought they had to be an alpha, right?

Because that's how we were all brought up, at least in the West. And I consider Australia and other, you know, developed countries to sort of follow that through line, that narrative, that in order to be an effective leader, first of all, you usually had to be a white guy (not always, but most of the time).

But even aside from that, even if you're a woman, and were going to be a successful leader, up until just a few years ago, you had to be charismatic, you had to be directive, you had to be decisive, you had to be visionary, you had to be the one at the front of the pack, you know? You had to set the targets and run off and people would follow you like Pied Piper. Right?

Well, no.

**James:** That's great. That's, like, the best news ever.

**Jeffrey:** Exactly.

**James:** It's actually a direct parallel from my core industry I was in, was direct selling. And there was always this idea of what a salesperson needs to be, you know, this loud mouth, wah, wah, talkie type, you know, outgoing personality. And I realized, you know, from the research that I read back, you know, [SPIN Selling](#) by Neil Rackham, and so forth, that it showed the better salespeople were just, you know, able to ask questions and follow a system.

And it made sense to me that that followed across to leadership as well. A better leader is probably more interested in cultivating and growing their team. And maybe the success of their leadership is more attributed to the results of their team, rather than just how impressive they can be, you know, heaping up their own ego and taking credit.

I used to have a sales manager who would walk past my desk and literally take the gift that the client would give me off my desk and say, Thanks, son. He would literally steal the fruits of my labor, and claim it for himself. You know, he was an alpha's alpha. He was a former boxer, a Dutch guy, and he was the number one back in the day. I learned a lot of lessons from bad leaders, probably more from bad leaders than I did from good leaders.

**Jeffrey:** Yeah, like what not to do, right?

**James:** Yes. I've seen some outrageous things, outrageous leadership styles, and I guess having a different cross section of roles exposed me to many different styles, and I found my version of what leadership looked like, you know, in the absence of your resource back then, and I wish it was around, because I actually went out and bought seven books on leadership when I got promoted to be a sales manager.

And I learned from what was the best back then, like, you know, [The One Minute Manager](#) and so forth. Those were the things back then, or Warren Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader*. You know, as time goes, things like *Command and Conquer*. I mean, I lived that era. It was scary.

**Jeffrey:** Yeah. And we still need that kind of leadership in an emergency. You know, it still helps to have - you know, I start my book with a case study of a surgeon. And the reason the surgeon ended up as the primary case study for the kickoff of my book is because I was trying to make a point, that when you're under the knife in the operating room, you want an alpha, you know? I hope that when I get on the airplane to Australia, the person running the plane - white, black, female, male - I don't care, but I hope they're an alpha, because I hope they're telling everybody what to do so that we get there safely.

## **Dispelling a false narrative for would-be leaders**

So there's a role for an alpha leader. But what has changed is that there's also a role for a whole broad spectrum of leadership that didn't really fit the cultural narrative until just a few years ago. And now it's breaking open. And I saw that happening in my coaching practice and my classes.

You know, you mentioned teaching at NYU. So I'm teaching a capstone leadership class at NYU, New York University. And I look around the room, and there's 25 students, and they're probably from 25 countries, because of, you know, being in New York, they all want to come to New York.

And I asked them, you know, what do you think it's going to take to be successful? And unfortunately, they were still carrying this false narrative. Like, Oh, I have to be Steve Jobs. I have to be, you know, the one that does it all.

And I said, Well, what if the quieter, collaborative leaders are actually just as successful? Let me show you some research that shows that that's the case. Now, you would think they would then get very disappointed. They were like, Oh, no, no, no, that's too bad. I wanted to be a lot like Steve Jobs. Not true. What really happened was about 75 percent of the class was like, Really? I don't have to be like that to be a successful leader? Tell me more, please. Because that's what I've always been told. And it's a lot of crock of you know what.

And so all of a sudden, there was this eye opening. Like, Oh, you mean, I can be a leader in a lot of different ways? And that begins a conversation around, leadership is not about you and what you do. It's about what you create with other people. It's a story of we. It's a tribe, it's a community, it's a group, it's a team. It's not about this special personality that's sitting at the top of the pile.

And when I started teaching from that vantage point, you know, these millennial students that I have are just like, finally, yes, this is what we've always sort of known intuitively. And yet, now we have some research to back it up, and we actually have a professor who's teaching it to us. That's ultimately what led me to decide, you know what, maybe I better write a book about this.

## **Generational differences and expectations**

**James:** Do you think, generationally - you know, I noticed changes in the different generations, because of the life circumstances they endured, like, a quick observation from my perspective is the builders like my grandfather, they had it pretty tough. They went through wars, and they couldn't get butter and stuff. And they were pretty old school.

You know, my, my grandpa, who was one of my first employers, I worked in his timber broking business, which was in his backyard. And I turned up about three minutes late one day, like in my first week, and he pretty much fired me. He was hard core. It taught me a big lesson, and I got this old school discipline from him, from that generation. And he was working the telephones for a living. That's how I ended up being good at selling, because he taught me that whole craft.

Then the boomer generation, like my parents, they had a few good things coming on, and the hippie generation, and they're a little more into music and stuff. And they seem to, you know, have a fairly interesting time. And a lot of those people were the leaders when I was coming through, and I'm Generation X. And we had a nice balance of technology and old school discipline.



And then I was hiring Generation Y. And I used to find, like, a generation X, you say, you can't lick your elbow with your tongue. They'll look at their elbow, and they'll just think, yeah, that's probably about right. You tell Generation Y, they'll start trying immediately. They were a lot more hands on. But they're also like the generation, why the hell aren't I the managing director by now? I've been here for a week. They just lacked the protocols and the disciplines and the rules that the previous generations seem to have.

And then of course, I've got kids now in different generations. So I've noticed, you know, they're behaving very differently to me. Like, one of them, he has a new job every few months, and that doesn't seem unusual to him. Like, back in my day, anything less than two years was like, a massive black strike on you.

**Jeffrey:** That's true.

**James:** Like, five years was almost unheard of.

**Jeffrey:** Yeah. That one's true.

**James:** What have you seen now in the Zoom era? Like, I imagine there's a whole art to - well, I know, I've been at home since 2008. A lot of people have been at home since 2020. And there's a different way of leadership via remote, where you can't just walk into someone's office and lean over their shoulder and get eyes on what they're working on as easily, unless you're going to install spyware on their computer, which is, I generally, I don't like the idea of that from a business leader, but also, I would hate it as an employee. I would not want to work in that Big Brother Orwellian nightmare. But what changes have you seen just recently?

**Jeffrey:** Well, yeah, everything you're pointing to is absolutely true, that the demographic changes have caused, like, this huge shift in the way that we think about hierarchy.

I think that's probably the number one change is that the technology and the young folks come up with, whether it's millennials or Z's, whatever you want to call them, you know, they're used to being able to reach out and connect with anyone they need to connect with, instantly. They're used to not having to read an entire book, although some of them still do occasionally. But they're used to being able to Google whatever they want to know and find out about it immediately.

So it's like instant access to information, instant access to people. And so there's this expectation that they won't have to wait, that they won't have to go through layers of people or layers of information to get where they want to get. And that changes their expectations around their careers, right? They want things to move quickly. And that can be frustrating for the boomers; that can be challenging for more traditional leaders.



But there's a silver lining as there is with almost everything, right? And that is that the new generations that are coming up to step into leadership roles are also open to learning more quickly. You know, one of the things I wrote about in my book is how everyone can be a coach. I wanted to sort of share some of the secrets of executive coaching, because it's not that complicated. But people make a big, like, hide behind the curtain.

### The psychological side to being a leader

**James:** There's multimillion dollar industries in coaching, you know? Life coaching has exploded, and it apparently costs \$25,000 to learn that stuff.

**Jeffrey:** Well, you know, to do it well, maybe worth a lot, maybe worth good money.

**James:** Look, it's a great tool. I'm really interested that your background is in that psychology side of things. Because, you know, as a leader, you often feel like you're a psychologist, you know?

And I see this with the entrepreneurs I coach. They're always going to have human challenges. Like, as long as they have this business that's doing \$5 million a year, or \$10 million a year or a million dollars a year, and they've got a team of three, five, 15, 25, 50, 80, 100, they're going to have this ongoing battle of psychology. And understanding it is half the key.

Like, I think I do a lot of therapy for the people that I'm helping, you know, working out these crazy things we call humans and how they operate. There wasn't really great user manuals for that before. And they're all so different. And even if you get one that's the same now, they're going to change later. It's like, things happen. People react differently to the circumstances that's going on in the world right now, people have like, even regular hormonal changes.

Like, I've had a baby girl, the last two years, I think that's adjusted. You know, I'm not as competitive as I used to be for some reason. But I'm more nurturing, like, even I would have changed, and my leadership style's going to be noticed by my team.

## **The current need for virtual leadership**

**Jeffrey:** Yeah, You asked me about the changes since the pandemic, and the virtual sort of Zoom generation that's been created. That's what I call it. It's not always on Zoom. But you know, it's sort of the virtual generation that we've created because of this pandemic, that's really hit the whole world. Maybe a little less in Australia, but it's definitely something that's impacted us all. And that has created a need for virtual leadership.

And that has really been an interesting experience for me, to coach leaders in becoming more connected to their team through remote platforms. And I would say, if you asked me, like, what is the one big learning that leaders have to adjust to; it's that they have to be willing to be more human and more vulnerable. They have to let go of any perception or any presupposition of being perfect.

Because if they try to stick with, like, I'm cool, I've got it handled, and then the dog jumps up on the screen, or the baby cries or, you know, it's just not going to hold, right? It's not real. And the problem with when a leader tries to do that is it also sets the tone that it's not okay for everybody else to have a life. You know, we're all in our houses, we all have issues, we're all trying to struggle with all these things.

So the most effective leaders are the ones that relax, they become flexible, they are human, and they're willing to be vulnerable and share, you know, what's working and what isn't working. And then ultimately, their team actually feels even more connected to each other, because they feel like they're going through this experience together with a lot of empathy and a lot of support.

And I've seen leaders that have grasped onto this. And they're like, Oh, my God, I don't want to go back. My team is so cool. Like in the past, I'll give you an example, in the past, when we would get together in the boardroom, the introverts - because it's a power room, you know, like this is in New York City in their 60th floor, the glass, and it's very power-oriented - the introverts would be quiet. You know, they would sort of sit in the background and let the power guys talk and take over. There was a power cede, there was a whole energy of power and dynamic.

Now they're on Zoom, and they're all in little boxes in their houses. And I was coaching a leader to be more effective in that context. And I said, Why don't you encourage everyone to just go around the room and speak up and share their experience of what it's like to be...? And he said, You know, my introverts are becoming extroverts. And my extroverts are becoming introverts.

And I'm like, that's because there's really no such thing as extrovert or introvert. That was made up by Carl Jung about 50 years ago, and we launched on to it like it's some kind of secret, you know, key to your personality.

To your earlier point, James, people change. I can be very introverted, but I can also be very extroverted. And as a leader, you need to develop the flexibility to bring that out in people. So just one takeaway from this experience - and it's been hard. So it's not like it's been so wonderful, but...

**James:** Sure. But it happened. So therefore it is, right?

**Jeffrey:** Yeah. And a great silver lining from it is a lot of the leaders I worked with have come to really respect their so-called introverts. They've come to see that people can speak up, and if you create an environment that is, as you said, nurturing and empathetic, and open to collaboration and listening, guess what? All of those sort of quiet, brilliant people on your team all of a sudden start flowering and speaking up and become leaders themselves. So this is a silver lining of this situation we've got.

### **A decade's worth of experience leading virtually**

**James:** You know, I went from being in a physical location, we were spread across three stores, and I had 65 people in our employ, which I was responsible for - actually 70, 73, 76, something like that, it used to fluctuate slightly - to being virtual, and it was just me. And then over time, I built a team out to 65, virtual. And now I sold those business units off and I've now got six.

And the six people I've got have been with me between eight and 11 years now. And here's the interesting thing, and I don't know if this is right or wrong, but it just is, when we do our weekly call on GoToMeeting, we don't use cameras. Almost all of them are girls. I don't want them to hassle out about appearance or makeup or whatever. I don't care if they're there with a dog or babies or family or wherever they are, in a bus, it doesn't matter, coffee shop, Starbucks.

They're comfortable in that modality. And I am, because of my training, I definitely don't need to see someone to hear everything. I can hear tonality and voice. Because my grandfather was blind as a bat, and he taught me to listen on a telephone call. The only reason I do videos is like, we're recording now, is it's a courtesy to my audience. And sometimes my guests like to be, they're very visual. I'm not. I can take it or leave it.

And I think it's fascinating to me that [Clubhouse](#) became very popular recently, and that's an audio-only platform. I love that style of platform far more than videos. So for someone who does presentations or has a podcast and makes a lot of videos, I actually would rather just, I'd rather just go for a surf by myself or a couple of mates. I sit in my house, I have, for 12 or 13 years, worked from home. I don't need to go to a coffee shop to be surrounded by people.

And I think what you're talking about here is such a big takeaway for my audience, because we're almost all virtual. But I will say this, and this is one of the biggest learnings I've ever had with a virtual business - it's when you [go and meet the team](#) face to face and build relationships in real life, it doubles, quadruples or quintuples, I don't know what the term is, it just takes the relationship to the next stage.

Like, my team and I go surfing together in the Philippines, we hang out, and we have, like, 1 percent business content and 99 percent human interaction - just eating meals, doing experiences. Not contrived experiences, like, what do you want to do today, let's go to visit a waterfall or whatever. And we just hang out, and we get to know each other. And my team have become so bonded, now. They know my business as well as I do.

And one thing I'm really conscious of, because, you know, they're employed by me and it's my business, so there is definitely that separation, I tell them, I want you to have a great life, I want you to work whatever hours you want, have whatever days off you need, build your business activities around your family.

And I know, for one thing, because most of them are younger than me, they really value education and training and learning. They love sinking their teeth into challenges. And we actually stripped away all the traditional roles. And I said, just take whatever tasks you want within our business. And they do such an eclectic mix of tasks that you would never expect one person could do these things, but they've been with me so long and they've learnt so many cross-trained roles.

And we took a lot of things from the airline industry - cabin crew, cross check doors, we have checklists, [SOPs](#) and stuff. And we make very few errors, which is great. And they're so good and talented. And they're really hands off for me. I see that, and I talk about it, but a lot of my customers, they just think I'm talking a fantasy.

## **Four keys to effective teamwork in a virtual world**

Do you see this high performance level of team often? And do you think anyone can get there?

**Jeffrey:** I would say, the answer is no, I don't see it often. But the other answer is yes, I think any team can get there, if they're able to like, really distill down to the core elements of what you just described so beautifully. Because as I was listening to you, I'm thinking, you articulated with your own team what I would call sort of the four key principles of effective teamwork in a virtual world.

And so just for example, if I can remember, because you just did this, but number one, equity. What you did when you said we all turn off our videos, or we all turn on our videos, the conference call is powerful. If you're listening, sometimes the phone is a much better connective medium than video, because video can be very distracting. And as you said, people will pay attention to their appearance and spend time looking at themselves. We all do it. Not just women, we all do it.

So you know, video is great. And there can be very powerful connections just by phone. But the key is all or nothing. Don't have five people on video and five people on phone, because then you have an imbalance. That was one of your core principles at the beginning, is we sometimes use video or we don't use video. And so I totally agree with that.

Another principle that you pointed to was to leverage the power of actually being together. Right? That when you do get together now, and I'm hoping a lot of my leaders that I work with, and a lot of teams will get more intentional about this in the future, because they realize that they have in the past when they were all in the office all the time, they just took it for granted. Oh, we can meet at the cooler or we'd meet in the hallway or whatever. And now they're beginning to realize that when we actually have physical connection, it's very meaningful.

It can, as you said, double, triple or quadruple the relationship building. So it doesn't mean we don't do it anymore. It means we do it with intention. We do what we know works, which is you really do need to get together with people.

And then the third, I'll probably forget the fourth, but the third point you made in that narrative was getting to know people personally, not work-related. You talked about going surfing and doing other things and getting to bond with people. I just finished writing an article that I published, called Setting the Virtual Table. It's a whole article, basically, about how to have dinner with your team, when you can't be there in person. And it's no joke. It's like, you really can have cocktails, you really can have dinner.

**James:** We have Yellow Cab pizza Fridays.

**Jeffrey:** Exactly.

**James:** I send extra money to pay for a pizza. Everyone gets a pizza, they share pictures of it. We don't go on the video and share it. But if everyone's collaborating on this, you know, this special occasion to celebrate something great or whatever.

**Jeffrey:** Exactly. But that's the point, is that, you know, getting to bond as human beings is incredibly primal.

And then I do remember the fourth, because you really nailed it, and I want to give you a lot of credit for that. And I was listening as you were speaking, as I'm a coach, so I listen. And the fourth point that you made was about autonomy. You said, I stripped the roles in the hierarchy, and I asked people, what do they really want to do and what are they good at.



And that's getting at one of the core research elements of success in today's academic research, that is not as well known out in the real world, which is that autonomy really motivates people. When they feel a sense of ownership, like, Oh, I'm getting to use my capabilities, and I'm getting coaching, and I'm learning, it's not about the role. It's not about what you spend one hour, two hours, tasks, to-do lists. It's about developing your skills and doing something that you actually feel passionate about.



And if you give that kind of freedom to your team, you know, some people will say to me when I bring this up, Oh, but then there's tasks that nobody will want to do, Jeff, everybody will want to do the glamorous tasks. And I'm like, really? That's a myth too. I know when I was an entrepreneur, when I was first starting out with my coaching and training company, I had to buy the toilet paper. I had to buy the paper clips. I didn't mind. I told people I was an entrepreneur, I'm buying the toilet paper, because it's my office. This is so cool, dude. Like, you know, it's like, what you may think of as a low end job may be somebody else's bread and butter. Some people like administrative work.

**James:** Oh, it's like one man's trash is another man's treasure.

**Jeffrey:** Exactly.

**James:** Like, I don't edit this podcast. I used to edit my podcast. And you know, obviously, we're up to 821 episodes. I really don't want to listen to myself back for an hour. I had to do it the first time.

Like, the person who edits my podcast is brilliant at editing the podcast. And I don't think I've even listened to one of my podcasts for about two or three years. Usually, an audience member will let me know if there's a faux pas or something that needs an edit. But it's so rare, just almost never happens.

And to be able to hand that over, I know they take great pride in how well that comes in. And when the rankings come, and we get a lift or something goes well, I screenshot it and we post it to our wins channel. And we all celebrate it. You know, that praise, and it's genuine, sincere appreciation for the great work we do.

And I think every single week, I tell my team, I don't take them for granted. I know how great the work they're doing is. And it's almost a boring message, it's basically, you know, business is going great. Let's just keep doing what we're doing. You know, it's working, we've done well compared to a lot of other people out there in the market.

## **Revealing a surprising truth about coaching**

**Jeffrey:** It's so funny you say that, because that's one of the reasons why I wanted to write a book that was sort of pulling the veil back about coaching. Because coaching is not magic. It's actually a very simple skill, but you have to do it properly.



And to your point, one of the key elements of really good coaching is celebrating wins. You've got to take the time to acknowledge, recognize and celebrate when people make successes, even if it's small. And you also added, you do it regularly, not just once in a while, not just once a year, but regularly, like every week, and you point it out and you make people feel like, wow, yeah, I made a change. I made a success, whatever it is.

So you know, it's what's great is that these things are not rocket science, but they are proven to work. And the more people that say they want to be an entrepreneur or they want to step up to being a leader, if they follow these core principles that you've just outlined the way you run your team, I mean, they will, it's almost guaranteed that they'll be successful, unless they get crushed by the, you know, there's external things like competitors and things.

## Shoring up against future difficulties

**James:** Oh, we look out for that too when we coach. The bulk of my clients are successful and you know, the proof in the pudding for me was going through last year. Almost all of my clients had the best year ever. And you know, I hope we don't get canceled out for saying something outrageous like that. I know a lot of people have had a hard time and it's difficult. But there are certain things you can build to fortify yourself for difficult scenarios.

And again, I had a lot of education on protecting against calamity, from going through a recession, from going through a global financial crisis; I've already been through it twice before, and in different modes. And I've prepared my clients for this. We knew that this is an inevitability, we build our business for that, in the same way we have two people in our business can do everything.

Because I expect someone will leave at some point, you know, they will get married, or they'll want to start a family. In my case where [most of my team are in the Philippines](#), they sometimes go and change countries and they just can't afford to work for me anymore. So, you know, things happen. And I celebrate that.

So, you know, if a client says, Oh, you know, who does your show notes? They're fantastic. I'll screenshot that. And I'll put it in our wins channel, you know, and I know the person who does them is going to feel good, and their work is being acknowledged. It's not hard.

And isn't it interesting that because I'm a coach, and I've spent as much energy coaching my team as I do with my customers, that they get into this high performance mode? And I do see it repeat across to the clients.

## Science versus a traditional viewpoint

What are the science-backed discoveries have you found that countered a traditionally held point of view that almost surprised you?

**Jeffrey:** Wow, that's a big question. There's a lot of things that have surprised me. I would say one thing is that you can be an incredibly successful leader and be a quiet personality. You don't have to be the belle of the ball to be a super successful entrepreneur or a leader.

The other thing I would say is that you don't have to master all the different activities of your business. What you need to do is be clear that you're not the master of all the different activities of your business. And so that humility goes along with that vulnerability that I talked about earlier, that the most successful leaders that I'm working with these days, actually don't think about themselves that much. They really focus on other people.

And I think when I set out, you know, when you think about the coaching that I've done over the years, it's typically been with senior executives who think very highly of themselves. And so, you know, what's interesting is to watch that evolve, and to see the science show that, you know, it's the people that create the sense of community, that sense of tribe, that sense of belonging, that actually end up with the following, and not the other way around. It's kind of like analogously, you know, Berkshire Hathaway, who's the richest guy in the world? I'm forgetting his name now...

**James:** Warren Buffet, and his partner, Charlie Munger.

**Jeffrey:** Warren Buffet. Yeah. Not the richest, but he's right up there. I always think of Warren Buffett as like an analogy to leadership skills, because Warren Buffett is a very quiet, down to earth, sort of, you know, probably relatively introverted guy. And yet look at the level of success he has.

**James:** Yeah. He gets his McDonald's on the way to the office, and he drinks his Coke. And he reads books every day, by the look of it.

**Jeffrey:** Yeah. So whenever I'm coaching someone who says, Oh, no, no, I'm not, you know, I could never be a leader. You know, I'm not going to ever be able to run my own company. I'm like, What? Like, what about people like that?

**James:** You know, some of them don't make it into the books. We always hear about Steve Jobs and Henry Ford.

**Jeffrey:** They do, if they read my book.

**James:** That's right. Well, thank you for putting that out there. Because unfortunately, you know, if you read anything about these guys, or watch the documentaries, Henry Ford and Steve Jobs were very much tyrants in their style of dictatorship.

Especially Henry Ford. Like, he even set up villages where these people had to live, and he told them how they had to live. He was quite firm on the principles of controlling every aspect of their life, from what I gathered. And Jobs definitely had some outbursts and bad behavior. So those people make it into the books as the examples. So yeah, we definitely need examples, like you said, different colors, different shapes, sizes, ages. You can be a leader if you want to be a great coach, and if you want to put your efforts on to the other people.

You know, an interesting and telling thing is when I'm talking to a client of mine, and they tell me about their team, when I ask them about the team, if they say they're in the Philippines, I ask them, well, what region are they in? They don't know. I'm like, What language do they speak? Don't know. How many words of their language do you know? Zero. What else do you know about their culture? Nothing.

I'm like, so are we talking about a human being here or just a cog in a machine? Because it's, you know, I think a lot of the business culture books have been talking about outsourcing and employing contract labor, and they put it in very inhumane terms.

And I think the day you realize that these are actual human beings, and the employment you give them, like in the case of the culture I'm hiring, I know when I pay a wage that's actually feeding at least five or six people. That's a whole family deal. They're going to be the major breadwinner for multiple generations, and the primary carer and a huge responsibility.

And that's why they actually, for the most part, I'm just generalizing here, my observation and it's not scientifically backed, is they seem to operate from a position, initially, of fear, and safety. Their main gig is to not lose that income. That's, primary driver number one. And then if you can unlock the next levels, you can find the real person under there. And you take away the fear, and you replace it with a safe environment.

I had a previous guest, also very highly educated, [Nir Eyal](#), talking about creating a psychologically safe workplace. That resonated with our audience tremendously, and especially important if you're hiring from other cultures.

## The case for creating a safe environment

So I wonder if you've had similar observations in the change in that sort of forceful leadership versus a more safe environment leadership?

**Jeffrey:** Yeah, I think it's a huge sea change that's taking place, and that the leaders that recognize it are the ones that are going to be tomorrow's winners. And what that sea change looks like is recognizing that the key to success in today's world is innovation, right? We have to continuously change and update technologies and take care of the planet, and revisit our business models to incorporate more and more people into the success stories.

And in order to do that, you can't just have a small number of creatives. Right? Twenty years ago, you had this thing in the US called a skunkwork, which was the creative people got separated from the rest of the company. And they got a lot of freedom and autonomy. And they were usually the rocket scientists. And they were invited to do a lot of really creative things with AT&T Bell Labs, and a lot of those companies were military.

And then eventually you had Google come along and start to break that open. And in the last 10 years, for example, I have graduate students in my classes at Harvard and at NYU that work for Google. And they don't even have job titles. Their job title is evangelist, whatever that means.

**James:** Thank Guy Kawasaki for that one.

**Jeffrey:** Exactly. That's probably where they got it.

**James:** Yeah. You know, Google's sort of famous for allowing people to work on their own projects. And it's ended up having things like Gmail.

**Jeffrey:** Yeah.

**James:** And Pokemon GO came from Google Maps, which came from a military-funded operation, apparently.

**Jeffrey:** Right. But that is kind of my point, is that why should Google be the exception to the rule?

**James:** Exactly.



## Uncovering the potential in everyone

**Jeffrey:** What we're moving toward is a leadership model where you recognize that there's potential creativity and innovation in everyone. In the people in the Philippines, in the people in India, in the people in Brazil, everywhere.

**James:** Oh, they're exceptionally talented. They're shy until you stick a microphone in their hand, and then they're like the karaoke king of the party. They call it videoke. Super creative. And here's the interesting thing. You know, Peter Drucker talked about this in the 60s, that business is about marketing and innovation.

And key to the thriving success of the business I created in the search engine optimization market was we had a whole team on research and development. And the people in my team who were really curious and interested in working on stuff that didn't necessarily have an immediate payoff, they gravitated towards those sort of tasks where they get to play with things. Like, we used to set up sites and see if we could rank them, or if they blew up, and learn about how the algorithm works, because it's not published.

I actually use the word skunkworks with my clients on a weekly basis.

**Jeffrey:** Good.

**James:** And I even have this term in our own business, we have an [infinity project](#). My team and I, like, we're a business coaching, publishing type business. But we have an infinity project, which is [a business in the surfing market](#). And it's called infinity project because it never ends. There's no limit to how many blog posts we could add, there's no limit to how many videos we can edit.

And that is our skunkworks. It's where we can go and work on stuff if we don't want to do the business stuff, or if we've got excess capacity, or we just feel like we need a break. We just go and work on that, and we all quite like it. None of my team were surfers before they worked with me, and all of them are surfers now, which is great.

**Jeffrey:** That's awesome.

**James:** If more of the world surfed, it would be a much more peaceful planet.

**Jeffrey:** I totally agree.

**James:** I'm always talking to my team. Like they say, I've got this team member, they're feeling a bit burnt out, you know? I'm like, put him in a skunkwork. Start up a new venture, like, go into competition with yourself, or take your most playful product and give it its own brand and set them up and say listen, I believe in you. You've got this talent, and go and see what you can do with it and just let them run with it.

They come back to me later, I've had a business that's doubled every single year, for five years straight by just peeling off people from his team and giving them their own projects. And one of those projects is doing \$5 million a year now, it started from this idea of a skunkworks. And that was someone who was thinking about letting go because they no longer fit the business mold of what they were doing.

**Jeffrey:** How perfect. Yeah. That's right.

**James:** I remember this guy at Daimler Chrysler, he said to me, James, do whatever you do, but do it within our umbrella. That was working well up until it worked up until the point where my leader, he was very mean, he threatened to kill me with a steak knife. And then he spat on me and suggested I work somewhere else. And you know what my crime was, Jeffrey, this blows my mind. My crime was that I was too talented. And it upset him.

**Jeffrey:** Did you make him look bad?



**James:** Everyone in the business loved me and they hated him. And he was alienated from his own business. He became a reclusive sort of bipolar maniac. I call him the lunatic. He taught me some of the best lessons. And he also taught me some of the things not to do, you should not assault staff, or customers or people who run the business, you know, of the franchise that you operate. There's a whole other story in that.

**Jeffrey:** What you're talking about is the reason that I became a coach.

**James:** Is it? Well, isn't it funny how those experiences, I think you used the term silver lining. But I actually got offered a job. I got offered a job with a competitor down the road to run it. And I called up Mercedes-Benz and I said, Listen, I just want to say I'm not leaving the brand because of you guys or the product, I love the product, it's the best in the world. It's just this guy's like hard to work with now and I don't really want to grow his business anymore after the way he's behaved towards me.

And they said, Don't go, don't do it, we will find you a job. We will pay your wage to go and sit in our head office until we find your gig. Don't go anywhere. And I remember putting the phone down. And I had tears in my eyes. Because you know, like just the mental bullying and the difficulty I'd been pushed. By this stage, I had four kids. I had mortgage on my house, I had investment properties, and I basically had to start again.

And they actually called up another dealer. And they said you must hire this guy, you must pay him more than he got paid before. Or we'll take your franchise off you. And so he hired me and that was my last four years in my employment. So they actually gave me a safe haven. And they were true to their word.

So, you know, I've experienced, like, the worst. I actually had nightmares for many years. I think I had some kind of trauma from it that I had to get out of my system, you know, I've surfed it off now. I'm a much more relaxed person than I was back in those days. My life is completely different.

This is another message I've got, no matter what life looks like now, in 10 years from now your life could be absolutely 100 percent different, you can change, your environment can change, you can live in a different place, you can be married to a different person, you can have a different job or business or whatever.

**James:** So the possibility for change is there, and what you're talking about, Jeffrey, is the tools for that change. And it's pretty clear now, to be a great leader, we need to be a great coach.

## Some closing thoughts on leadership

What would you say in closing? I'll make sure I wrap you up. Because I could talk for the rest of tonight, your night, my day on this topic.

**Jeffrey:** Yeah, love it too.

**James:** It's like, so needed in my market. How can we be a good coach leader?

**Jeffrey:** I mean, I think what I would say to anyone who wants to start a company, or who runs a company, look around at the people that are within your circle. What that circle could look like is a Zoom call, or it could look like an office, or whatever it is. But look at them again. After you listen to this podcast, look at them again.

What do you see? What are you missing? What are you making up about yourself and about them that is not true? What are you telling yourself about their ability to do x or y or not, be a good this, not be a good that? What are you saying that is a story that's not based on fact? Go into exploratory mode.

A great coach - and you just said it, James, become a leader and a coach - a great coach is what I call a detective of human potential. You're on the search to find what helps someone, what makes someone tick, what makes them creative, what brings their greatness out.

And if you do that for yourself in the mirror, and then you do it for your spouse, and you do it for your kids, and you do it for everyone around you that's part of a team, then what you're doing as a leader is you're elevating everyone to bring their full potential out into the world - their creativity, their innovation, their passion, whatever it is that turns them on.

And if you're practicing that exploration, that investigation, that inquiry with others, then that's going to make you a great leader. It's not about telling people what to do. It's not about having the vision that you're going to like turn on all the lights on Mars in five years.

I mean, yeah, those are great leaders. And, you know, I'm a big fan of some of the folks that have that style.

**James:** They're not aspirational in my mind. I don't want to be sleeping under my desk at work and never seeing my family for months on end. I'm not that obsessed to go and populate Mars that I would do that. So it's always worth asking the question, isn't it? You know, if that's the prize I want, am I prepared to pay the price to get it? That changed my path. It stopped me saying, Well, I want to make \$10 million a year.

Because if I was doing your exercise and asking you what truth am I hiding from or what am I talking to myself about, that was really about a need for significance or whatever. And in reality, I can have a way better life on two or three million bucks a year than I could for the things I would have to do to be getting \$10 million a year, with the current knowledge of how I would have to do that. I'm sure I could probably figure out a way, and I'll keep on it. But it's not my prime goal.

**Jeffrey:** It probably wouldn't change your life very much, really.

**James:** Well, it would detract. One of my filters is, can I surf today? And if I ever come up with an answer, no, then I would have to question, where have I gone wrong? Which wrong path did I take? Because that's my daily minimum KPI, I want to surf every day. If I had podcasts booked all day, and I didn't surf, I'd turn into an angry version of myself. Sure, I got more podcasts. Sure, I'll make more money. But I didn't surf today. I've grabbed the money on the table, but I traded it for life. No, thank you very much.

**Jeffrey:** Well said. There's nothing more valuable. It's the only thing we really have, to be honest, at the end of the day.

**James:** So thank you so much. We've been chatting to Professor Jeffrey Hull. Get the book, [Flex: The Art and Science of Leadership in a Changing World](#). And if we've ever been in a changing world, we're in a changing world, right now. So, great timing on that one. Thank you so much for sharing, Jeffrey, this has been a really close to my heart topic. I hope I haven't talked way too much in this episode. But you've shared some, great insights.

**Jeffrey:** Your story, to my mind, when you share your story of what you're doing now, of how you're leading your team, of how you became who you are, you know, what I tried to do was distill some of the key principles from your story that make you so successful, that hopefully your listeners can find value, because if you can do it, anyone can.

**James:** This episode is going to be recommended to me in all my coaching discussions when people are talking about that leadership, and especially on how do they lead in this generation, how do they manage it virtually? I'm pointing them straight to Episode 821. We're putting a link to your book on the episode, we'll put the show notes up there. And I just want to say how much I've appreciated you sharing your valuable time, and I hope you will come back in the future, especially if you publish another book, or you want to come and answer questions. We'd always have you back anytime you want.

**Jeffrey:** Thank you. I appreciate that. I will hopefully see you again soon.



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