

Thrivecast Episode 69: Thriving as an Introverted Leader

Trish Kritek: [00:00:00] Welcome to another episode of the University of Washington Thrivecast, the podcast designed to help School of Medicine faculty thrive. I'm Trish Kritek, and today we're joined by Dr. Janna Friedly. Dr. Friedly is the chair of the Department of Rehabilitation Medicine and someone who's held a variety of leadership roles across UW Medicine.

Janna's also someone who identifies as an introvert, and I invited her here today because I think that's such an interesting topic to talk about, and that is thriving as a leader and identifying as an introvert. And so Janna, thank you so much for being willing to talk about this, because it's a topic that I know a lot of our faculty are really interested in.

Janna Friedly: Well, thanks for having me. I'm excited to talk about it.

Trish Kritek: So I want to start off, you know, I think we have... There's stereotypes about leadership where we say someone needs to be not just extroverted, but, like, command a room, and dynamic, [00:01:00] and want to glad-hand. And we could come up with lots of things that I think fit into a stereotype of leader, and I'm putting air quotes around leader.

And we see them. I think we see those stereotypes in a lot of places. And I also think that there are so many different ways to be a leader, and I believe that in my heart that we need all different folks as leaders in our community. So I am curious, as you stepped into these different leadership roles, if you felt like you were pushing up against the kind of stereotypical definition of leader.

And maybe you could talk a little bit about that as a starting point. Yes, absolutely. So I agree. I definitely think that there are stereotypes about the ideal leader, and oftentimes you associate being a leader with being extroverted. But some of the overcoming of that stereotype for me was perception of what a leader is, and not just externally.

Janna Friedly: There was a moment that was really a turning point for [00:02:00] me several years ago as I actually was on my Peloton. I was... I was doing a Peloton class called Our Future Selves series, where they brought in speakers, and one of the speakers was Adam Grant, who's an organizational psychologist at the Wharton School of Business, and he gave a talk about his work and I got very interested in it and started learning about it.

Um, but he did research actually that looked at different styles of leadership and what kinds of leaders were more effective and in what situations, and that actually really resonated with me and gave some weight to what I was experiencing, which is that

introverted leaders actually can be very effective, and not only can be effective, but oftentimes are more effective than extroverted leaders, depending on the situation and depending on who you're leading.

For me, having that research background to back up what I was experiencing really helped me to embrace being an introverted leader and recognize that there were different styles for [00:03:00] different situations that were effective.

Trish Kritek: I want to talk about all of that some more. I want to highlight, you said Adam Grant, because I bet there's some people who heard that and are like, "I'm going to go Google that and read about what was published that kind of inspired you," so I'll put in a plug for that.

And then I really like what you said was like maybe in multiple different situations, being an introverted leader and the strengths that an introverted leader could bring to that situation might be better. And so let's talk a little bit about that. Like, what are the aspects of kind of approach to leadership that someone who's introverted might navigate in a different and potentially better way?

Can you give me some examples of those things that started to resonate with you?

Janna Friedly: Yeah. So building on what Adam Grant's research was, because I think this is fascinating, his research actually showed that the leadership style that's most effective really depends not on the leader, but actually on the people that you're leading.[00:04:00]

The research that he did, he did a couple of interesting studies. One was with a pizza delivery companies, and then one with some college students that he had them create a scenario where they were folding T-shirts in a T-shirt folding company. He was able to show that extroverted leaders did very well when they were working with people who were not performing as well or who were more passive, not producing.

And they did more poorly when they had very independent thinking and, and very active, highly productive employees. And introverted leaders did very well with the highly productive employees and people who were independent thinkers. And that really resonated with me, because in academic medicine, we are working with very highly intelligent, highly motivated, very productive people.

I think academic medicine is actually really well suited for introverted leaders who can [00:05:00] help those people thrive. And sometimes extroverted leaders, if you're always extroverted, it may not actually bring out the best in your employees if you're working with that kind of employee.

Trish Kritek: I love that lens of, like, there's a phenotype of leader that might work best in different types of situations, and also with different cohorts of people. And I think-

Yeah ... if the folks in your department weren't just complemented by the folks that you said, "These are the people that I want to work with," then they're not listening. But I appreciate you- It's true ... broadening it to all of academic medicine.

Janna Friedly: Yeah, it's true.

I do have to give a plug for rehab medicine is a team sport, right? So we, we work with, you know, team members who are rehab psychologists and physicians, and physicians of all specialties, not just physiatrists, and physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, people who are really deeply invested and very motivated and very skilled.

And so they don't need a leader who's going to come in and dominate [00:06:00] and who's going to tell them what to think and what to do. They need someone who's going to actively listen and look for different perspectives, and help them to maybe put it together, help support them. Definitely don't necessarily need somebody to come in and dominate.

Trish Kritek: Yeah. I- first of all, as an intensivist, I feel like the same thing is true of the clinical spaces that I work in. And in my administrative world, I would say the same thing, that I'm surrounded by people who are collaborating and coming together to work on teams. So all of what you said resonates with me.

And then there's two things that I heard in that latter part of that that I want to kinda dig in on a little bit more. I heard you say they need a leader who will come and listen. And- I actually believe deeply in my heart that that's where you start as a leader, so I'm curious kind of how that plays out for you as a leader, because I do think that in general, these are broad strokes, that folks who are more introverted are more likely to listen first, and I'm curious how that plays out for you.

Janna Friedly: Mm-hmm. [00:07:00] Yeah, absolutely. I think I try as best I can to listen, and I do think that people who are introverted do tend to, to listen more, pick up more of the nuances of what's happening in a room, rather than feeling the need to be the first person to speak and to dominate a conversation. I think that that works well for a lot of circumstances.

There are definitely times when having an extroverted personality or an extroverted approach is helpful, and so you do have to gauge the situation, and I think that's probably the most important thing is really understanding which approach is going to match the best with the situation that you're in.

Trish Kritek: Let me follow that thread for a second longer, because I think sometimes people who are introverted shy away from stepping into the opportunities of leadership because they're worried- Mm-hmm ... that they're not going to be able to do that more

extroverted thing when they need to do it, it, you know, based on the [00:08:00] circumstances that you just were kind of alluding to.

So I'm curious for you, was that something that you intentionally worked on? Is it something that happened spontaneously? Like, that finding those moments when you're like, "Well, this is the place where I'm going to have to step up into the conversation a little bit more, or I'm going to have to go outside of my comfort zone a little bit more," and, and how have you navigated that?

Janna Friedly: Yeah, so I think part of it for me was that understanding of the role of introverted leaders. I think that helped me to become more comfortable being and embracing being an introverted leader and not feeling like I had to change who I was in order to be an effective leader. For me, what has been really important has been to be authentic and true to myself and not changing my personality to, to be somebody that I'm not.

Embracing that. I try to go into situations knowing in advance what I need to bring to the table. And so sometimes if I'm going into a meeting where I know [00:09:00] that it's a high-stakes meeting where I need to be present, I need to be engaged, I need to lend my voice actively, I prepare myself for that. And I think going into those meetings well prepared and knowing what your role is going to be helps you to overcome any kind of discomfort that you might have with that role.

And for me, it's not necessarily discomfort, it's just it takes a little bit more energy, and it's not as natural for me. And so you have to be much more conscious of it. And so I think for me it's just a more of an awareness of what situation that I'm going into and planning.

Trish Kritek: Yeah, the planning part That makes a lot of sense, and the being conscious of it.

And I want to also amplify what I heard you say, which is it's not necessarily uncomfortable, but it takes more energy. And I think people would think of me as extroverted. In reality, in many places I feel more introverted, and I definitely can tell when I have to exert a lot more energy to be on the far [00:10:00] end of extroverted.

So I completely agree with that, and I can feel that for sure as well. I really like the part about planning and preparation. The more prepared you feel, the easier all of those conversations are. Going back to what you said a little bit earlier, the other thing I heard you saying is, like, listen, and then I heard a lot about collaboration, and I'm wondering if you think there is advantageous aspects of being an introverted leader that help folks work as a team or be more collaborative, or is there something that you bring to that space that's particularly advantageous?

Janna Friedly: Yeah, I mean, I think that along with the part of the active listening or the deep listening is that people feel genuinely heard, and that can help to build trust faster, and that can also allow people to feel that their voices are important and heard, and it can allow other people to bring forward their ideas.

That helps to build collaboration. I definitely think that this style of [00:11:00] leadership is really well-suited for teams and collaboration.

Trish Kritek: Yeah, that relational part where you're invested, listening deeply, and then building trust. I think we know that leads to more effective teams, so that all makes a lot of sense.

Are there other aspects as you've taken on higher level and different leadership roles of where you feel like being your authentic self, which I so value so much about you, and I hope all of our leaders can feel like they can be their authentic selves. Like, are there other parts of how you lead that you think, "I think I do this particularly well"?

I'm not asking you to brag about yourself- ... but I bring the introverted perspective to this, and it's effective in leading change or supporting people or whatever aspects of the leadership that you're doing.

Janna Friedly: That's a great question. I think, I hope that this style of leadership [00:12:00] provides people a model for their own leadership and provides some psychological safety to be able to be their authentic self and to give them permission to be themselves and to embrace whatever style that they have and to allow some of those other introverted people to feel comfortable speaking up in, especially in meetings.

So I hope that my style allows people to do that.

Trish Kritek: Okay. Want to say that I think that part where if people see folks who look like them, see the world like them, behave like them, but also are authentic to who they are themselves, if you see that, then you can say, "I could do that." And so I do think that that's very powerful.

This podcast is designed for early career folks. I think other folks listen, but I like, that's kind of my target audience. So I'm wondering if you had more advice for early career folks who are contemplating leadership roles and say, [00:13:00] "Yeah, I don't fit that phenotype that I see in the kind of, quote unquote, leadership."

What advice would you give? And I think you've already given a ton of advice, but is there anything else that you think is important for folks to hear and know and support of them?

Janna Friedly: I wouldn't wait until you feel ready to jump into leadership. You will build your leadership identity by doing it.

And so I think it's just important to jump in. So that's one thing. And then, as I mentioned before, I think you got to stay true to who you are, and I think part of that is really taking the time to figure out who you are and what your style is and making sure that you, that you understand that first. And then picking roles that play to your strengths.

And so there are leadership roles that are maybe better suited for introverts to start with, so committees or mentorship roles or small project leadership, and picking opportunities to connect with people one-on-one or in small groups or if you're in [00:14:00] a large group, identifying, you know, one or two people that you can really connect with that can be sort of, um, a mentor or a sponsor for you I think is really helpful.

And then, you know, as we talked about the energy piece, making sure that you build in time to recharge. So if you know that you're going to go into a situation and you're going to have to play an extroverted role and that's not your, that's not your personality, that's not your typical thing, you do, you do have to think of it as a role and that you're playing a role.

And just know that you may need some time on the back end to recover and to rest and recharge, and that's okay, and that's not a flaw. That's just part of the process.

Trish Kritek: So much there. I'm going to walk through them because I think they're all great. So the first one was, don't wait until you're ready. I couldn't agree more.

And interestingly, you know, for several years I've run the Rising Leaders course, now led by Dr. Giana Davidson, and we're [00:15:00] enriched for introverts in the group. Because I think sometimes people think, "I need to do this course," or, "I need to do this training," or, "I need to do more before I'm ready." And I think it's great they take the course.

I want them to take the course. It's super that they're there. And sometimes it's because they're worried that they're not ready, and I think your advice of saying, "If you wait till you feel, like, 110% ready, you're waiting too long," I love that. And I think that if you're introverted, you're probably more likely to feel that way.

So totally makes sense. The message of, of being authentic to yourself, but really I think the second part of that was a know thyself. Understand who you are and who you are as a leader. That also is wonderful advice, and perhaps something that we don't give ourselves enough space and time to figure out.

I, I'm not sure, how did you figure out kind of who you were as a leader other than your Spin- oh, no, Peloton class?

Janna Friedly: Yeah. Well, I think I've always known I, I was an introvert, so it's pretty obvious. But I, in medical school they had us do the, the Myers-Briggs personality [00:16:00] test, and I think it was our first year of medical school, and I was an INTP.

I still remember that. And so I was an in- introvert, very clearly an introvert. And then they had us position ourselves in the room with the people that were most like us, and it was very interesting to see because the people who were very introverted went into specific specialties and there were definitely different categories of people.

It was pretty interesting.

Trish Kritek: Yeah. I also have done that. I'm an ENTJ, though I'm kind of on the cusp of E and I. All right. Third thing that I heard was pick your roles that might be more supportive as you step into leadership spaces, and find the people who could be partners or mentors or sponsors. Maybe committees make sense.

Places where it's going to be easier to kind of get into the flow of leadership, and I like that as a super tangible something for people to kind of think about in terms of testing out those spaces. And then it is so important for all of us to find ways to recharge, but I think that acknowledgement [00:17:00] of it's normal to feel potentially exhausted when you're stretching to play the role of being more extroverted in certain spaces.

I feel like that's really affirming, and I appreciate that kind of input for folks to say, like, "It's not something that's wrong with you. That's expected and okay to feel like I got to go do the thing that's going to recharge my batteries now." You have shared a ton of wisdom. I can't imagine there aren't a bunch of folks in our community who are like, "She's speaking to me," and I think that that's really important.

I wonder if you have, because I ask everyone this, one last pearl that you want to share with folks before we wrap up?

Janna Friedly: Ooh, one last one. We touched on some of these already, but I guess I want to end with, I think from my perspective, the best leaders aren't necessarily the loudest, and they're oftentimes the people that you can trust.

And so y- you can be highly effective as an introverted leader, and the research backs that up, that [00:18:00] introverted leaders oftentimes are as effective or even more effective than extroverted leaders, and it depends on the situation and your team. So you need to understand your team and what they need from you at that moment, and then you need to be flexible in terms of your style.

You need to build trust with people in lots of different ways, and you need to build trust in some of the quiet moments one-on-one, and not necessarily always in large public spaces where you feel like you need to be extroverted. So you can do that one-on-one when it's more comfortable for people who are introverted.

Trish Kritek: I feel like there was a lot of wisdom shared, a lot of insight, and, and to be honest, a lot of role modeling, and showing people that not only are there different ways to be a leader, but potentially, despite what we portray on TV, in movies, and all kinds of other places, being an introverted leader in our world is potentially a much more effective way to be a leader.

So Janna, thank [00:19:00] you so much for joining me and everyone listening today. It's been a true pleasure to talk with you. Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it. Of course. And I'll say as I always do, that if you want to listen to more episodes of Thrivecast, you can find them at Apple Podcast, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your podcasts.

You can also find them at the UW School of Medicine faculty website at faculty.uwmedicine.org. Thanks for listening, and have a great day.