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Paul Thies: American tycoon John Rockefeller is reputed to have said, "Good management consists in showing average people how to do the work of superior people," but perhaps we can look at it another way. Rather than divide people into classes such as average and superior, we might see that superior effort is latent within our people, and it's the manager's job to help draw out what was already there.

Successful businesses are finding that good management consists in creating cultures where people want to do their best because they feel encouraged to be their best. Hello, I'm your host, Paul Thies. On this episode of *If/When*, we discuss talent enablement with Shannon Miller, Jacobs' executive vice president and the president of the company's Divergent Solutions operating unit.

During her almost 25-year career at Jacobs, Shannon has had a rich and varied journey, starting as a process engineer and evolving into project management, sales, operations, and human resources leadership, spanning multiple industries including technology, resources, infrastructure, pharmaceutical, and consumer products with assignments in the US, Europe, Australia, and Canada.

Most recently, prior to her appointment as EVP and president of Divergent Solutions, Shannon was Jacobs' chief growth officer and lead for enterprise risk management. In the discussion that follows, Shannon shares some of the best practices she has witnessed throughout her career, and the importance of trust in creating an effective company culture.

Shannon, thank you so much for joining me today. I'm looking forward to talking with you about talent enablement, something that you know quite a bit about. Actually, you've had a number of roles at Jacobs, leadership roles, but then also in our sales organization and in human resources, so you've got a very interesting and expansive viewpoint to be able to comment on this. Really looking forward to unpacking some of these questions with you.

Shannon Miller: Me too, Paul. Thanks for having me on today.

Paul: Absolutely. We'll dive right in. A lot of organizations, I think, this first question would be relevant for them. They want to be able to get the most out of their employees, not just from a utilitarian aspect, but also to just really win the hearts and minds of the populace and have people put their best effort forward. This first question is, what do you think are the most pressing obstacles for organizations to successfully enable their employee talent pool?

Shannon: I guess I'll talk maybe a little bit about obstacles, but then also maybe what good looks like when we think about enabling the talent pool. I think the biggest thing right now is just time. We are in a world that's moving faster every day and staying in front of, certainly, challenges that our customers are trying to solve, staying in front of dynamics around what employees are looking for as far as overall employee experience and different career paths. I've been in the professional world for nearly 25 years now, and I can tell you the pace every year quickens in our own personal lives.

I think that's probably the biggest obstacle, staying in front of the rate of change that we're experiencing, whether that's in our consumer lives or professional lives. I guess with that as a backdrop or a foundation, I think what companies need to do to really successfully enable the talent pool, like you talked about, it's not just about grinding it out and your job is this and go produce. We've really moved on from that. It really gets to being clear on what the purpose and mission of an organization is, and how you can help align our workforce, our employee talent pool around that.

I think when you can connect, and there's a ton of research around this, when you can connect and be very clear on the purpose and vision of your organization, and that's really what problems we're trying to solve, like the business of what we do, is really critical. We've seen organizations that state a very lofty purpose and vision, but it has nothing to do with the work that they actually do. I think that's really critical.

Then when our people can see how they align to that, it provides almost a timelessness around what we're trying to accomplish together. Then when you layer on, change around digital technologies or skills and capabilities that you need to have, you can keep up with that pace of change because you have this aligned purpose and foundation that you're working from. I think that's really critical.

Along with that- it's just this fact that career paths are changing all the time. If we focus too much on what made us successful yesterday, and you can do that from a business model perspective, you can do that from a role perspective, you can do that from a skills and capabilities perspective, that helps you inform decisions that you're going to make going forward, but it doesn't predict future success. That's like a used analogy all the time. I think that's really important when we think about staying in front of employee talent pools.

The second thing I think is really important is just this active listening and engagement with our people. I think there's an obstacle there. Companies are getting bigger. They're moving faster. They're changing their business models. If you get out of sync with really active listening and empathetic listening of your people, I think you can become out of balance and that becomes an obstacle for you. It can be a key to success as well, is just really being connected.

With that, I think it requires leaders to just be even more focused on helping see their people be successful versus just necessarily focusing on the numbers and operating purely from a financial point of view.

Paul: I know. I think that's beautifully said. I think you really hit it in terms of time being the great friction point because these engagement efforts and things like that, if you really want to cultivate authenticity where employees are really bought in and they don't think you're just trotting out platitudes but you really mean what you say, it takes time to cultivate that trust and that empathy, and like you said, that active listening and it takes a lot of discipline.

That can be hard when quarter numbers are coming due or whatever, and there's all these kinds of pressures we have, that any company has, in terms of performance. Management really has to invest in time. Again, I think that takes a lot of discipline.

Shannon: I think, on that, it speaks to this requirement to be proactive. It seems like when you wake up in the morning, you should be focusing on all these other fires that might be closest to you, but that investment in your people and investment in listening really brings dividends, I think, long term. It's constantly pulling yourself forward, in that respect.

Paul: Now, let me ask you this. Can you think of a time when you've seen or heard of culture efforts that backfired or otherwise failed to produce their intended effects? Why did that happen and what do you think was the lesson there?

Shannon: A couple ways, and maybe I'll try to put it in a few different buckets. It goes back to some of the things that we talked about. When your culture doesn't align with your purpose and your mission of what you're trying to do in the organization, you end up out of balance. I think the other part that is so important is really understanding the business of what you do and what problems you're trying to solve for your clients.

At Jacobs, we're trying to solve some of the world's toughest and most complex problems. If we're not really clear on the work that we do, the problems we're trying to solve for our customers, and really thinking about what type of culture is required to activate that, to enable us to do the work that we're doing and connect with not only our customers, our shareholders, if you're a publicly-traded company, or even some of these other governance mechanisms, but then also how you attract talent. I think that's really, really critical to drive that clarity.

I think the second part is we often talk about you have a big culture for an organization, but you also have microclimates that exist in an organization. We're a very broad company. If you think about it, the climates can be different based on which geography you work in. A culture climate is going to be a little bit different in Poland or India or Australia than it is, necessarily, in the US, and I'm sitting in the US here today. Culture climates look differently in the southeast than they do the west or the northwest and et cetera. I think you have different climates that align to a broader culture.

I think you just have to be aware of that. You can't drive an edict that it's going to be the same in every corner of the world. Industries and market sectors naturally have different climates. I grew up working in the consumer products business, and then I did some work in the pharmaceutical business and oil and gas. If you just think about the different climates of culture that exist within those industries, that also has an impact. I think it's appreciating that, as an organization, you want to have an overarching culture that embraces all of these little climates that you might have going on around the organization and making sure that that gets aligned. I think that's important to appreciate that. We've learned, over the course of time, especially as we've integrated or acquired companies, that you can't drive a one-size-fits-all approach. You've got to take it up to that higher level and then embrace those individual climates that you're trying to create within your teams.

I think the second part is you constantly have to be evaluating it. Culture changes. It goes back to the time possession that we just had, is being able to reflect on it and say, "Hey, look, we were headed in this direction. This was helping drive these results. Here is actually what may be unintended consequences or the positive

outcomes that we saw out of it." Being able to, I always use the term, dial the volume up, dial the volume down on different things that you do, I think is really important.

Then lastly, I guess, being cognizant that culture manifests and shows up through a variety of different things. We tend to talk about it at Jacobs as two big buckets. The engagers of culture and the enablers of culture. The culture is defined in those two realms. What are some examples? Enablers are things like our data and technology that we use. When you surface numbers about how much we're engaging with our workforce, and our listening and feedback mechanisms, that helps enable a vibrant culture.

Engagers are things like symbols that we see. How a CEO shows up in a town hall or maybe lack thereof. [chuckles] The leadership shadow that our leadership teams cast across the organization. Those are ways that we engage with people. Maybe you have a very transparent organization where we're communicating our results. We're being very open and transparent around how we're performing as an organization. That drives engagement across a business.

Things like symbols, how our office spaces operate, are really critical ways that people engage. Are we a place where, when you come to the office, it's a great meeting place and people are coming together to co-create and solve problems? You can clearly see how that drives engagement in a culture. I think thinking about the various subtle things in those two categories is really important when you're thinking about maybe transforming, or solidifying, or continuing to perpetuate a culture that you're trying to create in organization.

Paul: I love that idea of climate too, thinking about it in terms of climates, because you say geography, certainly you think about certain countries and whatnot, but there's so much more that goes into it. Climate is this almost umbrella term that captures the esprit de corps of the people on the ground. I really like that a lot.

Shannon: I also think about it, the analogy of when you go to a wine-growing region. Grapes that grow high up on the hill and they get a lot more sunlight, the way the grapes taste and express themselves in a bottle of wine is different than those that maybe have a little bit more shade in the afternoon, but it all makes great wine. You have to appreciate what you can get from the different parts of a valley of how you produce maybe an overall product. Anyway, maybe that was too esoteric of an analogy policy.

Paul: No, I love it. There's not just one-wine-fits-all, right?

Shannon: Yes.

Paul: Shannon, let me ask you, what are some of the best practices you've seen throughout your career of a leader who was able to bring out the best in their teams?

Shannon: I think there's a few things there. One, it's how you show up every single day, and being consistent in how you show up is really critical. We can all think of times that we've worked with leaders where you might think, "How is Shannon showing up today? Are we going to get like the really excited, happy, everything is

wonderful Shannon or are we going to get the she's not in a good mood and now I have to temper or adjust how I operate?"

That's not to say that you don't show any emotion, because you have to, and that you're not your authentic self, you absolutely have to be. It's about just leveling that out. When I look back at my career, we can all think of those stories that maybe end up in a Dilbert cartoon or something, around the very leader that's operating in the highs and the lows. If you just think about those leaders that you know show up consistently every day, they're their authentic self, you get to know them, you do understand when they're feeling like things are going great or maybe we need to think about things that maybe we need to be working on.

It's amazing how that can stabilize an organization. It takes out the highs and lows of the noise in the organization and drives consistency. I think that's really critical. I also think, when you think about how you show up as a leader, it drives transparency and conversation. It drives just a consistency in how we're operating. They go hand in hand together.

The other thing that I think is important is really the number one job of a leader is to ensure the success of their team. When you show up with your goal to make the people that work with you on your team successful, and I think this is also critical to working in a team, that you're there for everybody else's success, that aggregates to success in your role and what you're trying to accomplish.

It also always puts you in the shoes of not being self-serving, that you're really serving the team, and then of course the broader organization. When I think about what I'm most proud about as a leader in the past, it's really around seeing people get promoted, or being successful, or moving on to another great job, or being able to live out their purpose in their role. I think that's just really important.

Last but not least, I guess I'd say is, this element of trust is super, super critical. That comes in a lot of ways. Being transparent in how and why you make certain decisions, admitting when, "We tried that, it didn't work, let's do something different," and people feeling okay to speak up and help co-create where you're going to go going forward is really important.

Really fostering trust, and trust is one of these things that just doesn't happen overnight, is really important too. I don't know, just a few things that I think are really important as a leader.

Paul: No, and I'm glad you honed in on trust because when you were talking about the importance of a leader showing up in a consistent manner, so that people on the team understand they have a sense of what they're getting and it's not, "Is it going to be happy Shannon or **[unintelligible 00:16:28]** Shannon," but it's Shannon. It all comes back to creating an environment of trust. We don't want to be hokey about it or pollyannish, but it really is critical.

When there really is that authentic trust, when teams can trust you and you can trust them, that so much more can get done. You think about some of those environments where trust is lacking and just the tomfoolery that has to go on to cover your bases and make sure the boss doesn't get spun out on this, in a negative way, it impacts

the effectiveness of the team because you're focused on the wrong things. Instead of focused on, "Let's all win together and who cares who gets the credit" kind of thing.

Shannon: Yes, totally.

Paul: Now, speaking about the shadow of the leader and cultivating trust, can you speak about the role of mentorship and the impact it's had on you both as a mentor and a mentee?

Shannon: Yes, for sure. First, I'll just ground set on two terms that I use and I'd like to bifurcate the two. They go hand in hand and are really critical, I think. They've been really critical for me and my career growth and how I operate. It's the definition of a mentor and a sponsor. It's critical to think about them in two different ways. First of all, to answer your question, it's been hugely impactful in my life. There's absolutely no way I would've had the career journey that I have or I'd be in the position that I'm in today without having some phenomenal, very trusting mentors, and then also sponsors.

For me, a mentor is somebody that knows you really well. They can have a trusting and open and honest conversation around giving you feedback. They see you in action, so they have a feel for how you operate, how you lead, how you work, what your strengths are, and then also those areas that maybe aren't necessarily your strengths. They have a in-depth knowledge of you and they've seen you in action, and they provide immediate feedback.

Some of my best mentors, there was a gentleman that I worked with when I was in sales. I lived in Philly, but he operated out of Cincinnati, and we would go to Indianapolis quite often to meet with a client. In that 80-mile drive from Indianapolis back to Cincinnati, either before or after the customer meeting were our informal mentor sessions.

I never really asked him, "Will you be my mentor or not?" but when we would come back and make the drive to Cincinnati, he'd be like, "All right, you missed this opportunity in the meeting to do this follow-on work with the customer," or, "Share this capability," or, "Really ferret out what we were trying to position ourselves for commercially," or from a scope perspective.

He would tell me the positives. He was like, "I love the way you came in and talked about this." We would talk about how we were working as a team, and it was so impactful in that just drive home that it really helped me be, at the time I was a salesperson, a much, much better salesperson. He was an operations person, but he was just giving me that in-the-moment feedback. I can think of other people in my career that would pick up the phone after maybe a large audience meeting, especially virtually, and this was a woman that I worked for, and she'd be like, "Shannon, you really should have not piped up at that moment," or, "You could have cut it off here," but just give me different feedback. She'll say things like, "They opened the door for you and you never walked through it to take the opportunity to express your point of view or get your point across." I think that's really important that they see you in the flow of work, and just you trust them and they trust that when they give you feedback, you know that it's for your best interest.

It's harder to mentor people that don't have a little bit of a working knowledge of you. There's varying degrees of intimacy of how they work with you. I think that that's an important bit. A sponsor is somebody who understands your strengths, where you've been in your career, and knows those 32nd elevator soundbites of what you're trying to accomplish in another role. They too have seen you in action. You probably don't leverage them as much to give you the performance feedback coaching bit but they clearly understand where you're trying to go and they can advocate for you for future roles.

I've had people who have been both a sponsor and a mentor, but I think it's important that people recognize that there's two roles when you're thinking about career growth, and putting people in those categories. The last thing I'll say on this is mentors change and sponsors change over time. You should always keep that pool of people fresh. Your career trajectory changes, what roles you might be doing change. You should always be open to refreshing and bringing people into your circle that continue to remain relevant for where you're trying to take your career.

Paul: Excellent. I've got a couple of audience questions, If Your game. Our first one, it comes from Catherine Wist of Wisconsin. Catherine asks, "What skills and competencies do you see being the most important for career growth and success in the digital age?"

Shannon: Yes, I like that. A couple things. I was talking to some high school kids last night that are in a STEM club and in chemistry club, and I was mentioning the programming languages that I learned as a child and none of them, of course, knew any of them. [laughs] I think, oftentimes, we compute skills as like, "I know Python or I know Java," right? Very hard skills.

It's really important to think about things as soft skills. We talk about this a lot at Jacobs or how what are the complimentary soft skills that stand the test of time? I think some of those are absolutely being customer-centric.

I had a role in Jacobs, and I still do, from an executive leadership position but around enterprise risk management and in conversations with our board members this de-risking of an enterprise, and I'll come back to what this means for people and skills, is being customer-centric. If we think about customer centricity and having agility to innovate, they go hand in hand in your career growth.

This idea that knowing what customer problems you're trying to solve how you engage with your client is really critical. I think that's just important. Always being customer-focused will carry you and win the day. When I think about reading layoffs that are going on right now, where we are from an economic environment, and just talking to some of my peers in other companies, they're like, "We hired ahead of demand" or "We built organizations that weren't really focused on our client, at the cold phase of working with our customer."

Those are the roles that end up a trading when you're financially challenged. I think customer centricity absolutely critical in the digital age. This idea of being agile and innovative is also critical. You've got you innovate, not just for the sake of innovation but innovating to solve a customer problem. Innovating as a skill and a capability as a person, it goes back to just basic problem-solving or scientific method. What's my

hypothesis? I want to try this, I think this is going to be the outcome, let's give it a go, let's reflect on it from a continuous improvement perspective and say, "That worked, that didn't work. Okay, great. Now let's try this and move forward."

That constant feedback and feed-forward loop is critical in people. It's easier said than done to be agile, especially when you get my age where it's like I've been there or done that, this is what was successful in the past. It's really critical that you use your past experience to inform or help you with future success but also be completely open-minded that maybe you need to look at it from a very different vantage point.

I think the last part, when we think about digital, going back to the beginning of this conversation around time being the great resource or lack thereof, it's just important to be nimble and agile. I think also, with that, is inclusivity. Really, leveraging the collective wisdom of a group and a team and recognizing that you're not the only person that can solve the problem, I think that that means you need to be humble as an individual and learn from others.

Constantly learning, being inclusive from a mindset perspective, cognitive diversity in your teams is really critical to think about how we solve problems in new and unique ways.

Paul: I love that. Honestly, it comes back to what we were talking about with trust and authenticity too. Team members have to feel, say, safe that they don't have to know everything or be like **[unintelligible 00:25:33]** capable in all disciplines, that they can raise their hands, say, "Well, this isn't a strong suit," or 'I need some help here," or this or that. That the team will rally around that.

Otherwise, you get into those situations where people are trying to fake it till they make it instead of being honest about shortcomings or whatever because there's a lack of trust. There's a fear that I've got to present in a certain way as opposed to saying, "You know what? There might be a better way for us to tackle this problem." I'm not sure what it is. I'm open to ideas.

Shannon: Yes, I think that's absolutely right.

Paul: Our other question from the audience is from Ms. Chloe Arnette Binks, of London. She writes, "What benefits can be realized by an organization that focuses on talent enablement, and what are the benefits to an employee who works for such an organization that focuses on talent enablement?"

Shannon: If we just think about the skills we just talked about, our people are at the cold phase of solving problems for our customers and they are where great ideas are born, incubated, and scaled. When an organization thinks about how you activate the collective wisdom of an enterprise. Then an ability to funnel and channel and focus those efforts to drive scale, I think that you can't put a damper on the growth that can be achieved from that.

If you think about it, executive leaders in companies aren't the ones that solve problems, they help enable it. It takes the collective wisdom of an organization to

really think about how we move at a faster pace because they're the ones that are solving problems again for our customers right at the forefront of any challenges.

I think what makes that exciting for people, and we've seen it, is we've started to shine a light on the ideas and capabilities across our organization and then how do we funnel and drive that for exponential organic growth. That's an exhilarating place to be, I think, because you feel valued in what you're doing, you feel heard, and it also opens up opportunities.

It is very much like, when our people can help us grow as an enterprise, it provides opportunities for our individuals to grow in their own careers. That symbiotic relationship between the two, an organization thriving and people being able to thrive, I think it makes you unstoppable. Putting that focus on our talent, I think, is really critical and I think exciting for organizations and for individuals that want to be part of it.

Paul: Excellent. Well, Shannon, thank you so much for your time today and unpacking the topic of talent enablement with us. It's great to hear a leader such as yourself who has had a variety of career stops and various disciplines and has really seen firsthand like those things that work and that really help draw out not only people's best efforts but their willingness to give their best efforts. Really appreciate your time today.

Shannon: Thank you. This is an area that just gets me excited. It's what makes you jump out of bed in the morning. If we can get this right and stay in front of it, it makes getting out of bed worthwhile, honestly. [laughs] You feel like you've accomplished something, at the end of the day, and that's a great environment to be in.

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