

## Podcast 4 - Zahira Jasser - Followership with music

🕒 Mon, 12/04 20:13PM · 44mins

Ross G 00:07

Hello, you're listening to the Future Talent Learning podcast developed to help you build your leadership and management skills. I'm Ross Garner

Ross D 00:14

And I'm Ross Dickey. This week we're asking what is followership and why is it important for leaders?

Ross D 00:20

To answer these questions we're speaking to Dr. Zahira Jassar, assistant professor at the University of Sussex Business School, who before entering academia worked in the financial sector first as a banker, then manager and then consultant.

Ross D 00:32

How are you doing Zahira?

Zahira 00:34

I'm doing very well, thank you very much for having me today.

Ross D 00:37

You're very welcome. Now you argue that leadership and management programs give too much time to leading others and they ignore the role that leaders and managers play as followers. Why is this a problem?

Zahira 00:51

So when we think about leadership, we have inbuilt in our minds for, you know, since time immemorable, this idea that a leader is a hero, someone that saves us, someone that protects us, someone that leads us to, you know, new, new places or someone that has a vision.

Zahira 01:13

So we have created this very heroic, we have this prototypical heroic of leadership, heroic idea of leadership. And so when we reflect this into an organisation, we think about people at the top being leaders.

Zahira 01:32

Because of this heroic idea of leadership, we find it very difficult to apply it to the people in the middle, because the people in the middle are in a much more complex position. They are not fully free, or at least on paper, to implement visions, because they are tied to the organisational hierarchy and to the structure.

Zahira 01:55

And so there is this very contentious tension between structure and agency. How much can I do and how much do I need to fit in and how much do I need to listen to the people on top of me? So since, so for this reason, since the 1970s, because of an article written by an academic called Abraham Zalesnik in 1970, Harvard Business Review, Zalesnik asked the question, managers or leader question mark.

Zahira 02:29

And since then, we have really been teaching to our, in our business schools, in our programs. And so we develop in the idea that managers and leaders are two different things.

Ross G 02:44

Yeah, I remember speaking to a former CEO about this. It was a CEO of our company. And I sort of commented, I was quite junior in my career, that, oh, well, you're the leader, so you can do what you want.

Ross G 02:56

And he was like, no, no, no, I can also be fired. You know, I have to answer to a board. So even at the CEO level, you're still, it's not like at some point you're gonna get to the top. And then from then on, everyone has to do what you think.

Ross G 03:10

It's like the Bob Dylan song, you gotta serve somebody. You gotta serve somebody, even if you're the CEO.

Zahira 03:19

So this is a great point because then what happens is that in organisations, wherever we are, we cannot just be pure leaders. We have to also follow some structures, follow some needs of people, follow some other people.

Zahira 03:36

And that's why it is so important to bring in this concept of followership. So followership has been historically seen because we see leadership as a heroic action. We then see followership as a passive action.

Zahira 03:50

Because if you conceptualize leaders as heroes and saviors, then followers are those that need to be saved by the hero. Those that are in a position of need, those that are in a position of passive, in a rather passive position.

Zahira 04:07

And so no one wants to really call themselves a follower, right? And so you have leaders at the top of organisation. We have managers, which are mediocre. We don't know what to do with them in the middle.

Zahira 04:21

And then we have followers possibly at the bottom, which we are people that we consider as passive or people that do not have ambition, things like that. Things are not like this. These are mental constructs that we have with years and years of literature, of conversations, of particular narrative we built into organisations.

Zahira 04:41

The fact is that in organisations, we are both, most of the time, both a leader and a follower. And we cannot be any other way because you just explained to us how even a CEO is a leader of a company, but also a follower, for example, of the board or of trustees, depending on what organisation this CEO works for.

Ross D 05:08

Sorry to interrupt. Can that follow the leadership? Because if they're sort of following the board or trustees, that's kind of still almost more of a hierarchical structure. But can that also move in the opposite direction?

Ross D 05:20

So can leaders also be followers of middle managers and then middle managers of their direct reports?

Zahira 05:26

Exactly. And this is when things become really, really complicated. And so it depends on how you conceptualize. So often, often in organisations, we conflate the word leader for supervisor or for someone who is in a higher authority position and the word follower with someone which is in a lower authority position.

Zahira 05:50

And this is makes things easy because in this way, we can really speak about leading and following connected to authority positions, which at the end of the day, if the hierarchy is very strong, makes quite sense because people that are at the top can have the ultimate word at the end of the day.

Zahira 06:08

However, if we consider leading and following as action that are disconnected from authority and they, for example, are based on experience. So rather than using authority, we're using experience. So if we are in a team where there are people with different experiences, like a surgical theater where you have the anesthetics, the people that looks after the anesthetics, then, you know, and the surgeon, they need to take turns at leading and following each other based on their experience, based on the task that they are doing.

Zahira 06:41

Same in a cross-functional team when you have engineering and marketing. There can be struggles at time on who leads and who follows, but that's going to be negotiated and authority doesn't have much to do, experience has much to do with that.

Zahira 06:54

So I think that what I would like to discuss in this podcast is the hierarchical situation, otherwise we get really entangled and confused. I mean, I've done my PhD on this, so I can really take it to complex ideas of what leading and following each other means.

Zahira 07:10

But I think that here, because we are speaking about managers and managers by definition are inserted in a hierarchical situation and need to navigate that. And because our intention in this podcast is to help them understand a little bit better how to navigate that.

Zahira 07:27

I think I would like to consider the hierarchical situation in which if you're a manager, you're both a leader to some and a follower to others. And how do you navigate that?

Ross D 07:41

Well, just very quickly before we get into that, I wonder if you work with middle managers in your role and you worked with them previously and when you worked in the private sector as well. How would they respond to the notion that they remain a follower as they move up through the ranks?

Ross D 07:56

Because one of the advantages of getting promoted is you start to feel like you're becoming a leader. It's like you're becoming the hero. So do people generally respond positively to this or do they find it a challenge?

Zahira 08:08

So I teach this in MBA classes and as well as I actually run executive education sessions. I'm called in by companies, especially since I published the article on the Harvard Business Review, the Real Value of Middle Managing, which I explained this.

Zahira 08:23

And when I'm in front of managers and I explain this concept and I empathise and I tell them I understand very well how difficult it is for them to influence upward from a position of followership. There is something magical that happens in the room because finally they feel heard and understood in a challenge which is normally not even discussed.

Zahira 08:46

So when we teach managers, we usually teach them how to be leaders and they are like, okay, I power myself up, I go and I become authentic and I develop all these super skills and I become this hero and I go and I lead my people to better performance.

Zahira 09:02

Whilst what actually happens in reality is, okay, today I've got a performance review, I need to assign ratings that are not really the ones that I've chosen to my people and I need to negotiate pay cuts because we are now in a pandemic and I need to do this and that.

Zahira 09:18

So they need to follow and implement strategies from the top and this interaction with the top is hardly ever discussed. We teach managers how to lead but we do not teach them how to interact with people at the top and this does not mean being passive and swallowing whatever they are going to feed us.

Zahira 09:40

This actually means how do we negotiate? How do I influence from a position of a lower authority? So here we can go now if you want into what followership means.

Ross G 09:53

So it might be useful then to see what does followership look like in practice.

Zahira 09:57

So, followership in practice has different shapes. And thankfully, we also have some literature that guides us to understand what followership is. So, first of all, followership is defined as in this occasion as dealing with, relating to someone in a position of higher authority.

Zahira 10:22

And so, in this case, in organisations, I do not have the upper hand on decision making. So, the question starts to become, how do I influence from a position of lower authority? And by the way, influencing from a position of lower authority is much, much more tricky than influencing from a position of higher authority.

Zahira 10:43

So, all of a sudden, I'm in a situation when I really need to start thinking about what do I do? But I've never taught anything about this, right? Because I'm only taught about leadership and not about followership.

Zahira 10:56

The other thing is that when we think about followers, we think about this mass of sheep that follow what's happening at the top. But actually, we have theories that tell us that followers can be partners to leaders.

Zahira 11:07

So, they can co-construct that relationship of leadership. Followers can be a resistor to leaders. They can actually oppose leadership. And all this, we have huge amount of literature on voice, exit, and loyalty, and how followers can do if they don't want to stay in a place or if there's something wrong.

Zahira 11:28

A very interesting ranking of different types of followers actually comes from Barbara Kellerman, a professor at Harvard, who tells us that followers can go from isolates to bystanders, to participants, to activists, to die-hards.

Zahira 11:45

And clearly, you don't want to have isolates because these are the people that actually don't want to do anything and they don't cooperate. But you also don't want to have die-hards who really do not want to cooperate because they fight for their own ideas, so they're too active.

Zahira 11:59

So, you would like to have participants and activists in your team. Now, it's very interesting that if we start thinking about followers like this, this is very interesting from the position of a leader who needs to kind of interact with followers.

Zahira 12:12

Where do my people stand in this? How do they want to work with me? But also for a position of someone that is a follower and needs to interact with our leader, how do I relate to my leader? And you start really asking yourself different questions.

Zahira 12:25

How do I influence my leader from a position? And there are theories that can really help us understand that. For example, during strategic change in organisation, which is basically constant now, you can really learn how to sell issues upward, how to create coalitions to sell issues upward, how to turn something, innovations from the bottom of an organisation, as a manager, how do you turn that to your organisation into a strategic innovation that you can sell to your top management?

Zahira 12:59

So, there are a lot of really interesting things that you can do when you start thinking about yourself as a follower in these more active terms.

Ross G 13:09

So yeah, to what extent is this middle manager's ability to influence their leaders or to sort of manage up, as you might put it, shaped by the culture of their organisation and the extent to which a leader is willing to be influenced because I think to sort of go back to your original point, the leader by the time they've got to that point might now see themselves as the hero in their own story and they might think, well, I'm the one that's setting the course, the direction of travel here, who is this middle manager telling me what to do.

Ross G 13:43

So does that, I think it's kind of a cynical way to think about leadership. I think most leaders are very often to feedback from the people below them, but I'm interested to what extent you think that's important and what kind of role that plays in a middle manager's ability to influence the people above them.

Zahira 14:04

Okay, so this is a great question. And when I think about this kind of what happens, you know, what if and how do we understand in what situations, I always like to break this reasoning into three levels.

Zahira 14:18

I like to bring this reasoning into organisational level, relational level and individual level. And this really, really helps us unpack it a little bit further. So you're absolutely right that at organisational level, we might have an organisation in which there is a culture of greater fluidity in which ideas that come from the bottom are really important.

Zahira 14:39

Startups, you know, in startups, you have to be very, very, very agile, very fast. And people at the bottom, people that do coding, for example, are really our heroes here. And then we really want that kind of information to really flow up to the CEO very quickly and to become very quickly, to inform very quickly strategy.

Zahira 15:03

So in this case, the relationships are gonna be much, much more fluid and the followers are demanded to be absolutely proactive and participatory to strategy. But you have many other organisations in which this is not the case.

Zahira 15:21

In the financial industry, for example, organisations are extremely, extremely strong to the point that banks sometimes very large banks or very large are considered this very difficult organisation to change or to move precisely because there is not this agility embedded in the culture.

Zahira 15:40

The culture is very often connected to power. This is also very much reflective on how people are paid. People at the top are really paid a lot. People at the bottom are really paid much, much less. So that's quite interesting.

Zahira 15:51

So that organisationally, we can look at what kind of organisations we are in. Then we can go into the relationship between leaders and followers. And of course, we know from many, many theories of leadership that their relationship varies from person to person, from a couple of leader and followers to a couple of leader and followers, depending on a huge amount of things, understanding of each other, coming from the same background. So much easier to get along with someone, so much easier to trust someone that is like us, so much more difficult to trust someone that we do not understand and we can go into all conversation about diversity and inclusion from here, but also personality is so much easier to understand someone that is more similar to us rather than someone that is different from us or neurodiversity and so on and so forth.

Zahira 16:41

So that also depends on how easy it is to receive the advice of a follower from a leader or the influence of a follower from a leader. And then an individual level, some followers might not really want to bother and engage in upward influencing because their agendas are other.

Zahira 17:02

Some people might want to tick along in their working lives and then go home and play music. And all they do is to earn money to buy the best guitar and that's absolutely fine. And this is absolutely fine and this happens in organisations as well, right?

Zahira 17:18

So really if you think about that, there are never ending combinations about what it is, but I think the crucial conversation that we're trying to have here is when you are a manager who is committed to your work in an organisation, how do you negotiate this pool into directions being pulled on one side from having to motivate, energize and empower your team from a position of higher authority?

Zahira 17:51

And how do you influence keeping the loop, follow and deal with all that is coming down from the top and manage that relationship with your boss? And this position is the one that I'm interested in and it happens very often in organisations.

Zahira 18:17

And so I have developed a particular concept that can help us navigate this particular difficulty, which to us from here might look like, oh my gosh, that's such a rare occurrence. But when you speak to managers, oh my gosh, that happens 80% of the time that I'm actually pulled into directions that I'm in this position of negotiation.

Ross D 18:40

And it can sound negative when you frame it as we're wanting to influence and negotiate because that starts to sound like manipulate and get your own way and you as a follower do better than the leader.

Ross D 18:51

But in fact, as you become more senior in an organisation, you know less and less about what's going on. And you actually rely on the people following you to help shape that strategy because you're so disconnected from the day-to-day operation.

Ross D 19:04

So this is a followership as a positive role that helps leaders and also helps those that are then following you.

Zahira 19:13

Yeah, followership as active, as positive, as proactive, as an empowered position. This is what we need to look at followership like. So we need to kind of shift, as we shift away from this, as you just said, Ross, about the fact that leaders sometimes know less, and it is absolutely true.

Zahira 19:34

Leaders at the top get disconnected from the problems at the bottom. So they need to rely on their own middle managers or managers to reach down and to understand what's happening in the organisation.

Zahira 19:46

And so they want to have this kind of follower that keeps them updated, that is proactive, that reaches out, that tells them where something is actually not the way they're thinking about, that that should be absolutely, that's very important for organisation efficiency.

Ross D 20:08

So you mentioned Assyria, a minute ago that you've come up with and you've published it as a book that connected Lido. Can you tell us a bit about that?

Zahira 20:15

Absolutely. So moving away from this heroic idea of leadership, then the core idea in the concept of connecting leader is to embed the concept of followership within the concept of good leadership. So a good leader in our organisation is someone who can, at the same time, be an effective leader and an effective follower, which sounds much easier said than done.

Zahira 20:40

Because in order to be an effective leader and an effective follower, you really need to be able to navigate the tensions of that pulled in two directions of that negotiating cost cuts with the top and then negotiating them with the bottom of, you know, distribute being cut on resources but allowing people to use resources by scavenging or, you know, there is a lot of protecting people to innovate secretly at the bottom and then sell that innovation as strategic change to the top.

Zahira 21:13

You know, how do you navigate this kind of things? And so that my article in the Harvard Business Review articulated this. So I then come to speaking about some practices that help us think about how managers deal with this.

Zahira 21:30

And I put them together and I call them four connecting leader practices. I think about, I think about them in metaphors because metaphors really help us attribute complex concepts from one field to another, right, from one semantic field to another.

Zahira 21:50

So I think about connecting leaders as Janus. Janus is the Roman god of change. And he's a two-faced god. And so a manager as Janus needs to empathise with both sides needs to look towards their own boss, but needs always to look towards their own reportees.

Zahira 22:11

And this empathising can cause some risks, for example, burnout and, you know, involves a lot of emotional labor. So I mean, I speak about mitigation, mitigator factors that organisations can embed or managers can think about to mitigate some of these risks.

Zahira 22:30

So this burnout could be potentially mitigated by asking for help from a coach and having support and someone else to talk to, to, you know, speak about these tensions.

Ross G 22:46

That's particularly the case where you have context where it's a difficult decision has to be made. So you mentioned like pay cuts earlier on. So as the Janus leader you might empathise with why the senior leadership team need to make pay cuts.

Ross G 23:00

But you're also empathised with the people who report to you, whose livelihoods are going to be affected. They're going to have less money in the bank. And trying to negotiate those two positions and with you in the middle of it, you are both the good guy to the leaders and the bad guy to the one below and it's very, very difficult to navigate through that situation.

Zahira 23:20

Absolutely spot on. And we have found that during the pandemic, a slot of managers that we were speaking to were precisely in the situation of burnout, because they were trying precisely to do that, to support emotionally the people underneath them, and also to really tune into the emotions and the tensions and the difficulties that were coming from the both, the needs from the organisation.

Zahira 23:43

So this is absolutely right.

Ross G 23:46

Both positions as well. That's what makes it difficult. It's the, you know, because you understand that the organisation does need to be protected. It's in everyone's interest for the organisation to survive over the long term.

Ross G 23:56

But the short term pain that's associated with that is obviously individually painful. And so there is no right answer there. It's not like you can come down on one side. Both parties are right.

Zahira 24:08

Yeah, absolutely. And this really takes us into the next kind of practice that I think that effective connective leaders use. And this is highlighted by the metaphor of a broker. So someone then negotiates with both sides to bring them together.

Zahira 24:26

And so this process of negotiation, as you can imagine, is very complex. I use a particular example in my Harvard Business Review article. This is an example in which someone needs to promote someone else.

Zahira 24:47

And there is no space for promotion. And so the manager needs, and this happens very often, can I be promoted? Can I be promoted? A member of your team says, and you say, ah, this year the promotion process is very hard.

Zahira 25:02

Someone else is going to be promoted this year. But then you don't like me, then I'm going to leave the company. No, you need to stay. I'm going to actually promote you next year. So you go to your boss and you say, we really need to promote this person next year, or we need to do something else.

Zahira 25:17

Otherwise we're going to lose them, right? So we are in this situation. So how do you broke and how do you negotiate? How do you bring together both sides? I often have found that when I interview managers, and I've never said this in this interview, the reason why I know about these things so well is because actually I've interviewed hundreds and hundreds of middle managers for my research, beyond being one.

Zahira 25:38

So I have a lot of examples that come from real life. And we often have brokers who are really good at actually breaking a deal between a junior resource and a senior resource, by actually creating a bridge and taking the junior resource literally to speak to the senior resource so that they can hear, right?

Zahira 26:03

So there are really techniques in which people can do that. And when that happens, change happens. So having a manager that opens the door for you, because he has the ability as a follower to bring you into the room with his or her own leader.

Zahira 26:21

Now we're really thinking about something really nice that can happen here. So it's a really brokerage activity that middle managers often do. And the main risk there is unlocking that door with the people at the top and that so not having availability from people at the top or building the relationship so you have that availability is very, very difficult and very delicate.

Ross G 26:47

You want to build a relationship as well, you know, before you need it. You need to invest the effort to have that relationship before suddenly you're in this position where, oh, I wish I had this access and I don't.

Zahira 26:59

Yeah, absolutely. And as the other Ross said, in some organisations, there might be a greater culture of transparency, of humility, of open doors, and in some organisations, there might be not, right? So, you know, this is really, really difficult and the mitigators would be really to have a culture of transparency and openness where we do not mind to have now and then conversation with people that are at different levels and there is greater, greater fluidity.

Zahira 27:28

The next metaphor that I use in the Harvard Business Review article is the conduit. The conduit is a really, really interesting metaphor because here what we are talking about, the conduit of voice.

Zahira 27:42

So, voice is a really interesting construct in organisational behaviour. It means speaking up, challenging the status quo constructively for the benefit of the organisation. And voice is really important for a series of reasons.

Zahira 27:56

So, where voice is enabled, people can avert risks, can create, can avert, can improve strategy and things like that. But because voice is against the flow of authority, so authority comes down and voice goes up, being a conduit means really being able to speak up for others.

Zahira 28:20

So, as a manager, you can actually speak up for your team. So, you can gather really important information, critical information and have the ability to bring up this information with courage to the top.

Zahira 28:35

This is very, very risky for middle managers because it means exposing oneself to the top personally, taking the risk for the team. And so, voice is very difficult. And for middle managers speaking on behalf of others is even more difficult.

Zahira 28:52

It's charged with moral tension, with ethical decision making, and it's very, you know, it requires particular skills. The mitigator here for this kind of risk is really fostering a culture of psychological safety.

Zahira 29:07

I know that you know, you use a lot of AIDME and Monson concepts during this podcasts, and definitely the concept psychological safety resonates with this type of actions from managers. So, in organisations where there is greater psychological safety, that's something that can be done much more easily.

Ross D 29:27

And that's what Ross was talking about earlier on, making sure that culture exists and shaping that. And then the final type of follower is the Tightrope Walker. Do you want to tell us a little bit about that?



Zahira 29:39

Yeah, absolutely. So the tightrope walker is another interesting metaphor. And when I speak about these metaphors with managers, there is a constant kind of smile in the room, because people can really think about, oh my gosh, yes, that's absolutely me so many times.

Zahira 29:54

So I think that I have a huge reassurance that my research is pertinent when I speak to managers, because it really helps them think about themselves in different ways. And I think that the metaphor that does this the most, the catch-all metaphor is the tightrope walker, because tightrope walker is a metaphor that reflects cognitive states of managers.

Zahira 30:17

So when managers need to appraise constantly both sides of a dilemma, the cost-cutting is one of them. How do I sell innovation is another one. How do I allow my people to use resources when I actually need to, have been asked to save resources is another one.

Zahira 30:35

And so this critical thinking, the ability of critically thinking through these dilemmas. First of all, recognise that these are dilemmas and I am facing a dilemma is already an interesting one, right?

Zahira 30:51

And then thinking how do I think through this dilemma and how and the main risk here is a cognitive overload, a confusion and then a slowing down of action. Because if we start thinking too much about things, we know that we cannot make decisions quickly whilst middle managers are really asked to make decisions quickly sometimes.

Zahira 31:10

And so one way in which we can mitigate this risk of cognitive overload and confusion is really to encourage safe critical thinking spaces for peer discussion. So one thing the middle managers do very often, we are now thinking about middle managers as stuck in this hierarchy, but often peer-to-peer discussion is really important.

Zahira 31:32

Talking about these things. So a lot of middle managers want to sort this stuff out on their own. Well, actually the most important thing is to compare ideas, to seek adversary opinions, to speak to devil's advocate, really to critically think through these dilemmas with others as well.

Ross G 31:57

Yeah, so to quickly run through those four again, so the Janus follower was empathising with both sides. The broker was negotiating with both sides. The conduit was speaking up for others and the tightrope walker was a critical thinker and there's a lot to unpack there and I think you've covered a lot of ground quite quickly.

Ross G 32:13

So what we'll do is we'll put links to some more material in the show notes for this podcast, including a link to your book if they're more interested, they can read more.

Ross D 32:22

So as a middle manager, there may be times when you have to lead others, even though you don't agree with those that you follow. What options does a middle manager have in those kind of scenarios?

Zahira 32:33

It depends on what the situation is, I think that these kind of four metaphors really help us think through some of the options, right? So the option would be to negotiate. The option would be to, you know, sometimes you cannot negotiate, you just need to empathise with both sides.

Zahira 32:51

And that's a very, very straining situation. And, you know, sometimes in empathising with both sides and not, you do not have the ability to turn your empathy into action because it's just, you can't.

Zahira 33:05

You might lose people, right? You might lose people. So, you know, the ability of, you know, really living with the consequence of that is not easy. Or, you know, you can, if you really think that what you need to, what's going on is wrong and it's to be, something needs to be raised, then you can become a conduit, really speaking up and really telling the top guys, this is taking us into a dangerous situation.

Zahira 33:33

I've got my entire team telling this to me. I mean, think about risk management situations in banks, for example, this happens very, very often. You know, these situations are actually situations that I've seen.

Zahira 33:45

And the other thing is really to have the ability to critically unpack these two sides of the story. So, being a tightrope walker, be a critical thinker, being someone that can live with ambiguity. Not all of us can live with ambiguity.

Zahira 34:02

We have different abilities of doing that. So, developing these skills of living with ambiguity.

Ross D 34:08

I think that's really interesting. So I think that's kind of what I was hoping you would say is that sort of taking these four different practices or metaphors and thinking about these as sort of like a toolkit that I can apply depending on the situation that I'm in.

Ross D 34:21

And I can adopt that mode of communication or influencing or following or leading based on what the situation demands.

Zahira 34:29

Absolutely, thank you so much for that question. That was really good. Thanks.

Ross G 34:38

Okay, so let's wrap up with a bit of reflection. So, Ross, what will you be taking from this conversation and applying this week?

Ross D 34:46

So I think the main takeaway for me is that while I think my experience of working in an organisation is broadly reflective of what, Zahira's been talking about, I think it's very easy to fall into that sort of familiar mindset of thinking of it as hierarchies that are disconnected from one another.

Ross D 35:04

So you have direct reports and then the next level above that is middle managers and then the level above that with leaders, level above that board and trustees and that sort of thing. And so I think it's just sort of reminding me actually that this isn't how organisations work and they are all interconnected and middle managers have important roles to play there.

Ross D 35:24

And in terms of what I'll be applying, I think I'll be looking out for opportunities to be the Janus or the broker in different situations and trying to apply that toolkit I was talking about towards the end of that discussion.

Ross G 35:39

Yeah, great. I think for me it'll be about building those relationships with the senior leaders. So I am a middle manager and I think I could do more to build those relationships. So that when I do want to influence or negotiate, I've got some of that, I guess social capital ready to be spent at that point.

Ross G 35:58

And Zahira, what about you? What will you be taking away?

Zahira 36:03

In academia, it's middle managers, it's like different. I mean, you need to be the head of a department, I guess, to be a middle manager. I'm not, but I am, for example, the deputy director of the MBA at Sussex Business School.

Zahira 36:16

And I am continuously trying to get more resources for us. So I think that negotiation is always on the agenda for me. So I

think I'm a bit of a broker trying to get more resources and trying to get senior people to understand the needs of the people at the bottom. So yes.

Ross G 36:44

Let's now move on to a regular feature, one thing I've learned this week, where we share something we've picked up in the past seven days. Ross, do you want to go first?

Ross D 36:53

Absolutely. So I have been reading Nate Silver's *The Signal and the Noise*.

Ross G 36:58

You love Nate Silver. You talk about Nate Silver every time!

Ross D 37:01

Well, I try to, I try and make a point of it. So, Nate Silver, for anyone who doesn't know, is the founder of 538, it's a website that focuses on sort of pulling, data journalism, basically pulling in sports.

Ross D 37:13

And his book, *The Signal and the Noise*, it generally looks at prediction in various different fields, so like politics, climate, sport, the economy. But one interesting fact that stood out to me when I was reading it this week is something called the Super Bowl Indicator.

Ross D 37:32

I don't know if either of you have heard of this. So I don't actually know very much about American football. So apologies to anybody who's listening, who knows more about it than me, because I say something wrong in the next few minutes.

Ross D 37:45

But as I understand it, the Super Bowl indicator was basically that from the time that the two, basically there's two conferences in the NFL, there's the American football conference and then the national football conference.

Ross D 38:02

Those two conferences combined to form the sort of modern NFL. And since that time, whenever a team from the American football conference won, the stock market would decline. And whenever a team from the national football conference won, the stock market would be it'd be a bull year for the stock market.

Ross D 38:27

Obviously, those things have no, there's no sort of causal relationship between which team wins the Super Bowl and whether or not the market's going to be good. But it's been I think since the two conferences combined, it's been 75% effective in predicting which way the market's going to go.

Ross D 38:44

So just an interesting exploration of cause and effect or causation versus correlation. But I thought it was an interesting and slightly weird fact.

Ross G 38:55

That is weird. I'll be looking at my Stocks and Shares portfolio after this. Okay. Zahira what have you learned this week?

Zahira 39:05

Okay, so there is a new book out which actually came out a little bit ago called *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Management Theory* by...

Ross D 39:18

I love the title. Yeah, it should be clear.

Zahira 39:20

Todd Bridgman and Stephen Cummings, who are two academics who work in Australia. And what they're doing, they're historic, they are a historian of management. And they go and look at theories. And one of the things that they have uncovered, which is super, super interesting, is that our initial ideas of management were popularised by a guy called Louis Brandeis, who worked in the early 1900s in the US.

Zahira 39:55

And in his management theory, he had already incorporated ideas of sustainability and the fact that the businesses needed to work closely with natural resources, with a natural environment. And so there was that element of sustainability and that idea is actually much, much older than we think.

Zahira 40:15

Then that idea was removed from our management theory when we had more kind of neoliberal profit-driven shareholder models coming on board and really cutting it out. And so there is this new trend of management history that goes and rediscovers our connection between management and sustainability. And I absolutely love it.

Ross G 40:40

That sounds fascinating. Yeah, we'll put links to that in the show notes as well. Right. So this week I received a gift from a colleague. It's a book called Letters of Note, which is exactly as it sounds.

Ross G 40:52

It's absolutely charming. It's sort of letters from famous historical figures. And I was flicking through it last night and I particularly enjoyed one from... I think I'm going to pronounce this wrong.

Ross G 41:02

John Kricfalusi, who's the creator of the animated TV series Ren and Stimpy. I don't know if anyone's ever seen Ren and Stimpy. It's a rather disgusting looking TV animated series. And so John Kricfalusi is in this letter replying to a 14 year old boy who had sent him drawings and asked for advice on how to become an animator.

Ross G 41:23

And John's reply runs to eight pages. I was packaged up with a book on animation and it includes sketches to demonstrate what he's talking about. And so here's just a sort of edited taste of it. So the letter runs, Learn how to construct your drawings out of three-dimensional objects.

Ross G 41:38

Learn how to draw hands so they look solid. I want you to copy the drawings in this book. Start on the first page. Draw slow. Look very closely. Measure the proportions. After you finish each drawing, check it carefully against the drawing in the book.

Ross G 41:53

Then do the drawing again, this time correcting the mistakes. All right, bastard. This is to a 14 year old boy. All right, bastard. Let's get to work. My email address is, and it includes his email address, if you have any questions.

Ross G 42:07

I thought this was just a lovely way to respond to someone who's asked for advice and to take that level of time to write this reasonably long letter, little sketches to demonstrate the techniques he's talking about.

Ross G 42:18

It's just beautiful. It's very practical. I love that. Very practical. The boy that received the letter now works for Cartoon Network as well. Fantastic.

Zahira 42:30

Good story.

Ross G 42:32

Do you want to mention anything before we wrap up where people can find out more about you or your book?

Zahira 42:38

Yeah, I think all the theories I've been speaking about today are really summarized in a Harvard Business Review article which is online and I would love people to have access to that. I think it's highly practical, it's got a lot of case studies and managers might find that really, really useful.

Ross G 42:59

And that's it. You've been listening to the Future Talent Learning podcast with me, Ross Garner and Ross Dickey. Our guest



this week was Zahira Jasser. Until next time, bye for now.