



Your Lived Experience Is Expertise

As the leader of an organization that supports formerly incarcerated individuals, DeAnna must constantly assert her authority when working with stakeholders who do not share her background. Stevon and Juleyka break down how to take back your power when your knowledge or skills are being undermined, and he offers tips for leading and negotiating without compromising our values.

Lewis Clip: The reason she's been invited into these places is because of what she brings to the table. It may not always feel like that, and it's the difference between theory and practice. The reality is that the practice, her lived experience, is what's really the most valuable.

Stevon Lewis: What's up everybody? Welcome to How to Talk to [High Achievers] about Anything. I'm Stevon Lewis, a Licensed Psychotherapist. We're going to talk about asserting the value of our lived experience in a world that loves degrees, titles and certifications as markers of ability and expertise. But before that, Juleyka Lantigua, thank you for joining me again today.

Juleyka Lantigua:

Hey. I'm so happy to be back. Thanks for having me.

Lewis: Our guest today is DeAnna Hoskins. DeAnna runs an organization that empowers formerly incarcerated individuals like herself, to reintegrate into society, find their voice and become leaders. But in this role, DeAnna often feels like she has to defend her own leadership abilities and the value of her lived experience. Let's get into it.

DeAnna: JustLeadership is a national organization, the only national organization that was founded by and operated by individuals with lived experience who are formerly incarcerated. It was created up under the auspices that...individuals who had been directly impacted were excluded from tables of decision making and those decisions were decisions that were impacting our lives. I'm able to think back, the transition of getting my education and increasing my salary was scary as hell, because I was now losing all the crutches that I had around support, around my

rent, support to feed my kids. I was living paycheck-to-paycheck. If I lost a job or got terminated or downsized, my kids were going to be impacted because we were going to be evicted. The one thing about people who are formally incarcerated, we've been so disempowered thinking our voices don't matter. I think because people have identified reentry as an event, an event has a start and a stop date, but because it's not an event, it's a process of reintegrating.

DeAnna: I remember somebody said, "Reentry is reintegration, not getting back in the lifestyle to move it to a point of self-sufficiency." But what is self-sufficiency? What is success? It is defined by each individual, so for me it is always a process. And that's part of learning your skill, but also controlling your own narrative.

I had to learn to be okay being the only person who had been directly impacted in the room and understanding that my expertise of lived experience was not even being acknowledged. I had to learn to be okay with being the only African American in the room. Working in nonprofit, I have to hustle not only for my paycheck, but for the 25 people who are under me, who lives depend on it as well. Because if I don't talk the way a certain philanthropy or funder wants me to, they're not going to fund me and I have to be okay with that.

You're fighting for funding to survive, and philanthropy has their own agenda. And typically philanthropy has a board that drives it and the board, while familiar with the concept, may have not lived the concept. And it becomes a song and dance, a tap dance that you have to do, "Did I hit the mark of what your board wants to hear to receive funding, to continue to do the work that we do?" Or, "Are what you are asking me to count, collect as metrics even feasible and possible in this concept?" I think the most important thing that I have learned over the years is to never compromise my integrity or who I am, to authentically remain true to me, because at the end of the day, I have to be able to sleep.

Another thing that I've learned is no matter what happens, as long as I speak my truth, I've got a shot. and not to be intimidated. Being a Black woman in this space, when Black women are traditionally seen as the cleanup woman, we're not traditionally seen in leadership, especially a bold voice that's not willing to compromise, I'm not going to be popular. I've learned that leadership is not about popularity. Most leaders who care about what other people think have failed as leaders. For me, it's respect over popularity. You may not like me but you will respect me.

Reentry is a process, self-sufficiency is a process, getting to be successful is a process. My job and my goal is to get okay with not being okay in the midst of that process, but not giving up.

Lewis: DeAnna, thank you so much for sharing your experience with us. Juleyka, what stood out to me when I was listening to DeAnna's story is the awareness she has about her herself and the importance of her experience and the reality that it's not being valued in the way that she had wanted and her struggle with trying to make it appear or be valuable for others.

Lantigua:

Her experience is quite unique and in some instances, we might think it's an extreme of the other rising that Black women experience, because she had an experience that the bulk of Black women will not have. How does having such a unique and intense experience further marginalize someone professionally, especially when you think about reentering?

Lewis: Absolutely. It's the limited representation. Just being a Black woman in general in spaces of leadership, and then that gets exacerbated by the idea that she's formally incarcerated. I think it's really important and also I can assume, difficult, to try to continue to show up as your authentic self in an environment where you are constantly being told that your difference isn't what is wanted or desired or expected. And I think that she has to push back against that narrative and say, "I do belong here. I have purpose here and I'm going to stay even if it's uncomfortable for me and the other people in the room with me." And it sounds like she's really done that.

Lantigua: Yeah. I was basically clapping when she was saying those things and I love how specific she got. She talks about reentry in such beautiful detail because to her, it's not an event, it's not a thing that happens once and you're done. She says it very clearly, "It's a process." But then, she gives us the parts of the process, which is self-sufficiency, defining success for yourself, learning new skills, controlling your narrative, and being okay with being the only. I just wanted to be like, "And that's your masterclass for the day people."

Lewis: I'm over here snapping. I think that's the thing to do. You have taken back the power, where those experiences or those parts of yourself have been used to try to reduce your impact and your authority. You've taken the reins back and said, "No, I'm going to lean into that and I'm going to use that to say, 'This is why I belong. This is who I am.'" Without compromise.

Lantigua: And it's really interesting though because to her, doing that can be risky because as she mentions, she's dependent on other people's money to run this organization. Let's talk a little bit about that tension, because you could show up

authentically all you want, but you can't do it to the detriment of the work you want to achieve.

Lewis: Exactly. You can show up as your authentic self and you can also be broke. She's also responsible not only for herself, but I think she mentioned 25 people who are employed in her organization, that she's also accountable to. And so there's a real pressure for her to be malleable. What I took away from that, maybe like a theme, is that she's aware of the places of where she can selectively compromise in an empowered and authentic way, "Hey, I don't have to be so rigid that I can't make concessions in spaces or in areas where it's important in order for me to keep advancing towards my goal. Also, I know where the hard stops are of where I will not break or compromise so much that I'm not being true to myself."

Lantigua: Yeah. This is true. There's something she said that I love. There's lots of things she said that I love, but she said, "No matter what happens, as long as I speak my truth, I've got a shot." And that notion of giving yourself the shot is so important, right?

Lewis: It is. You can take yourself out of the game if you don't want to shoot your shot or operate in ways that you know you can. The reason she's been invited into these places is because of what she brings to the table. It may not always feel like that, and it's the difference between theory and practice. The reality is that the practice, her lived experience, is what's really the most valuable. And I think we can sometimes self-select out of our wins. We're going to get into this after this short break.

There's a tendency for us to react to what the world gives us, the feedback and to not lean into what we know to be true about ourselves. And it's inspiring to hear from DeAnna that she struggles with that and at the same time, she pushes herself to not capitulate or to fall victim to that. And so she really stands up for herself, takes those shots and says, "I know what I can do, I'm just going to run with it."

Lantigua: Yeah. I want to go back to something you said, which is the theory versus the practice, because she identifies this also. She says, "The board, while familiar with the concept, may not have lived the concept." What are the tools that we need for ourselves coming into rooms like that?

Lewis: This might be, sound counterproductive, but I think exactly what DeAnna's doing is leaning into it and she has to operate in ways that she knows are best for her and people that are like her and not be so, I guess, torn up about the fact that the people who are operating or making decisions with limited perspectives are causing her more distress, because her vantage point and perspective on the

problems that formerly incarcerated folks might face is on par or above theirs. I think for her, it's important to remember that, the frustration she's going to experience is based off of the fact that they have a limited view.

Lantigua: Okay. I'm going to push back a little bit on that, because even someone as experienced and knowledgeable as her is often not believed to be as knowledgeable and experienced. And it almost always comes down to gender and race. How do we not just blow up about that every single time?

Lewis: I would encourage high achievers like DeAnna to not take ownership of the lack of knowledge or experience for others. And I would put it back on them by asking them the questions about, well, what about your experience or your knowledge suggests that your way is more appropriate than myself, who happens to be from the community that you're making decisions about?

Lantigua: Okay, boldness. Okay. You're basically asking for receipts. Everybody, Stevon just said, "Ask for receipts."

Lewis: A 100%. Where's the evidence? Prove to the room and myself why we should listen to you and not me, when I seem to have more experience and more knowledge about it than you do.

Lantigua: There was something else that she said, and it goes with what we're talking about in this segment, which is, she said, "Black women are traditionally seen as the cleanup woman, not as leaders." And let me tell you, if I had a million dollars for every time I was put in that cleanup situation, like I get hired to basically run an emergency room. And so many Black and Brown women continue to be put in those situations. But in order for us to move forward, we often have to take those emergency jobs. What are some of the considerations that someone like DeAnna and other high achieving women and high achieving men who are put in these situations should be thinking about?

Lewis: The first thing is, let's not focus on how we got in the room, but stay more focused on what we're going to do once we're in there. And so, if we got in the room in a way that wasn't how we had hoped, our talent isn't being valued in a way that we had hoped or that we envisioned for ourselves, "But I'm in here now. Now you can't get rid of me. Now that you've let me in the room, I'm going to do all the things that I wanted to do because what else can I do?"

Lantigua: Yeah. Spot on. And DeAnna is very aware of this because she says, "To me, leadership is respect over popularity." It's that ethos of, "I'm here to get some work done and I'm about to get this work done. Like me or not, watch me work."

Lewis: I love that quote, "It's not a popularity contest." And I think there's a freedom in knowing that, "The expectation, I've already broken that. I don't fit the mold, I don't have the history for someone that's in my position is supposed to have, so then I am really free and liberated to be able to move about as I see fit, because I have nothing to lose, because I wasn't supposed to be here according to you anyway." Hearing stories like DeAnna's, really motivate me to continue to want to just pony up next to high achievers and keep them motivated so that they can continue doing the great stuff that they're doing in the world. Juleyka, thank you for joining me again today.

Lantigua: Of course, man. I got you.

Lewis: I love seeing high achievers like DeAnna achieving on their own terms, seeing themselves and recognizing what they bring to the table, being willing to compromise without betraying themselves and showing up authentically even when it's uncomfortable.

And that's a wrap. Thank you so much for listening to *How to Talk to [High Achievers] about Anything*. We want you to be a part of our show. We want to hear about your successes and challenges, your sacrifices and celebrations, and what's ahead on the journey for you. Send our Producer Virginia an email and we'll get your story on the show. She's at virginia@lwcstudios.com. *How to Talk to [High Achievers] about Anything* is an original production of LWC Studios. Our show is produced by Virginia Lora, Tren Lightburn mixed this episode, Juleyka Lantigua is the Creator and Executive Producer. I'm Stevon Lewis. On Twitter and Instagram, we're @Tal toAchievers. Bye, everybody.

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