

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PODCAST



Episode 43

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Host: Annemarie Cross

Annemarie Cross: You're listening to Women in Leadership Podcast episode 43 brought to you by Microsoft Surface. Hi, I'm your host Annemarie Cross branding communication strategist also known as the podcasting queen. Welcome to another episode of Women in Leadership podcast – the podcast that empowers you to reach your full potential.

Now as a leader in your business all of the decisions that you need to make, the actions that you need to take in fact everything is your responsibility if you want to build a successful business. However, that level of responsibility can become a little daunting especially for those of us who have a very small team or maybe even a team of one.

Now joining me on today's show is a guest who can totally relate to fear and self doubt. However, she was able to shift through her fear and self doubt and achieve some incredible outcomes. Ashley Olafsen is our guest today and she is a published author, Huffington Post contributor, a TEDx speaker and most importantly a teenager who's passionate about self-esteem, about body image media, mental health and so much more.

She's also a social entrepreneur who has co-founded a company called MOVE and co-directs numerous workshops and even a five day summer program. In addition to be a paid speaker, she also sends out news and creates YouTube

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videos. Finally, she is a member of the inaugural class of the Global Youth Advisory Council.

On today's show, Ashley is going to share three lessons that she has learned that has enabled her to achieve some impressive milestones which we'll share at the moment including the importance of being brave, the importance of just getting started, as well as the importance of confronting your self doubt. So welcome to the show, Ashley.

Ashley: Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited to be here.

Annemarie: So excited as well for you to share your insights because I know so many young women and even not so young women can certainly get stuck with all of the things what I try to share this morning. So let me just share some of your milestones. You recently had 70 girls from all over MA attend your summer program. That was this year's summer program and that was almost double the size from last year. Wow.

Ashley: Thank you so much. Lexie, my cofounder and I were so incredibly excited about it. We're planning on growing even more and next summer we actually want to do two summer programs – one for younger girls in middle school and one for older girls in high school because we so fortunate to have so much growth.

Annemarie: Yes. Just share briefly with us with the summer, what was some of the things that you included in that to help these young girls?

Ashley: Yeah. Absolutely. Our summer program and all of the work that Lexie and I do for MOVE is very much driven by personal experiences. For what we've personally

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Lexie and I lack in personal experiences we have guest speaker come to share their own experiences so that we were able to reach as many girls as possible.

Lexie and I essentially just shared our stories on things like body image, preventing unhealthy relationships, getting help from mental health so on and so forth. We do small groups everyday so every girl is with another group of about seven or eight girls further breaking down material with the squad leader, and just tons of different activities, games, vision board making parties, dance parties and so much more.

Annemarie:

I think no matter what age we are in our life's journey young, not so young, the pressure is on us from ourselves and from externally is huge. But I think in this day and age the pressure for young girls, young woman – if I look back to what I was worried about when I was a teenager to compare to pressures of today, I think your programs that you're running is so needed. So thank you for taking that helm and sharing with these wonderful women and girls that you're leading.

So also recently published your first book Survival of the Prettiest and you're incredibly proud of the fact that you got it done. I know many women who have a book inside of their and never yet quite get it published so congratulations. You're really proud that your summer program is fully run by teen girls. You also love that your staff members were girls who previously have grown up attending workshops and now old enough to be able to take on a leadership role.

I think as women and young women as well we don't realize that the impact and influence we can have in the people that we network with that we can just meet we are a leader because we can influence. I think when we really understand that it's quite powerful, isn't it?

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Ashley: Yeah. It's really really beautiful. Yeah.

Annemarie: You are also proud that you've got an intern and that we have people who so believe in the message of what you're doing in that they volunteer their time for a cause. That often happens when you're so clear on your why and you're driven by that passion and that meaning why. The people that just have the same values that aligned with that just step forward to help you so fantastic.

Let's dive in. The importance of being brave. How many of us allow fear to stop us from taking action towards something that we really dream about. Share a little bit more about this.

Ashley: Yeah. I just feel that I have been so scared to do everything that has really moved me forward in regards to my career. I remember being absolutely just so scared of what would happen when I gave the first Move workshop alongside Lexie to girls our own age and even older. I was worried. I was a junior in high school at the time, and I was worried about reputation. I was worried about peer disapproval and what would happen if I give bad workshop.

I just had so much fear that I wasn't going to be able to do a good job with it and then I was going to embarrass myself. I allowed that to temporarily hold me back and then I decided that I need to overcome that. I felt fear for running the summer program. I've been scared to publish my book. I've been scared to do so many of the things that I've done. But there's a really great quote about how your life expands or shrinks in regards how much you step outside of your comfort zone.

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I wish I could remember the exact quote but I think it's a really incredible one. I think the best way to conquer your fear is there's this quote that I have on my agenda. It's a passion planner. The quote they give us a sticker says action cures fear. I really believe that the best way to be brave and the best way to overcome that fear is through taking action. That's the only way you're going to make progress.

Annemarie:

I think no matter what you're trying to achieve there is always a certain amount of fear around that. Even if you have an idea of the actions that you need to take that you may have people that surround that you know that you are supported by and so recognizing that we're not alone in our fear that everybody has a certain level fear. But what I think is really important and what you did is recognizing that a lot of what goes on in our head is just assumptions. It's not really true at all.

In something that I've learned and I'm sure you may have learned this as well is that sometimes yes there may be people who stand up and say things that are not so nice. But you know what. The people that we are here to serve, to support, to inspire, to empower by us not being brave and sharing our message means that these people who need to hear what we are sharing your workshops, your summer program. If you're not out there sharing that then you're not going to impact the lives of these incredible young women.

So sometimes just a mix of that really just has us just take that step forward and when we start to achieve things and I'm sure you have had this as well it's like wow, okay, we're able to do that. What's the next step? Have you found that that's also true for you as well?

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Ashley: Yeah, 100% and I think like the really beautiful thing about the work that I've been doing it always has felt as though the next step has been very natural. It's been terrifying and scary of course. But like taking the next step it just seems the natural next progression. For example, Lexie and I right now are talking about an idea that we have for the girls that have graduated the MOVE summer program and the girls that have graduated the high school and middle school level.

I don't want to say too much about our idea because I want to make sure that it actually gets done and we're still working on it right now. The idea that we have is just like the obvious next step. It's just a matter of actually getting out there and doing it and facing our fears and being brave with it.

Annemarie: Yeah. Something that you picked out that you said and I'd love to just stress because so many of us we see our end goal but it is so big and so exciting that it becomes overwhelming. Because it's like I have no idea how to achieve that. That's because there are so many different steps that need to be taken.

So what I tend to do and what you have done and you not realize that you've done this is you kind of reverse engineered it and gone all right what is the first step that we need to do. What's the first logical step? Then that's get completed and what you've just said what's the next step after that. Sometimes just by taking that action and that's a beautiful segue into the next point the importance of getting started is just taking that step, isn't it?

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Ashley: Yeah. Something that I really really believe strongly is just you don't have to be perfect and I believe that it's more important to get started than it is to be perfect.

Annemarie: Yes.

Ashley: Because once you get started you're going to be able to get closer to perfection. But if you never even get started you're not even – you're so far away from perfection because you've not even began. Whereas if you get started, you can begin the road and you can begin the process to perfection. You can do that through learning.

Something that I think is you're going to make mistakes inevitably. It's a huge a part of entrepreneurship, so why not just make your biggest mistakes at the beginning and then fail quickly so you can learn fast. There's that old saying and then go from there.

Annemarie: What were a few things that you did or looking back you see that you had put into place that really supported you in taking that first step. Where there some key things that you did have identified and did have laid out to help make that whole transition into getting started so much easier for you?

Ashley: That's a really great question. I'm just so privileged. I really really am. I had people who believed me and people who supported me. I was not immediately face with rejection when I and three of my friends suggested that we give a workshop to the vice principal of the middle school. The middle school principal said absolutely. How can we do this together?

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She could have very easily just rejected us right there. She could have seen us a couple of 15-year-old girls with big ideas but who had literally no experience with running a workshop and that's a huge responsibility to be a role model for girls so young especially taking about such serious issues. But my mentor Mrs. Grady was literally like okay, let's do it.

Some of the thing that I've had really like in my favor that have allowed me to take the first steps was just definite like privilege in the sense that the people believe in me and that people supported me and that I didn't really face like administrative roadblocks or roadblocks from my school or from the people supporting me. Backlash and criticism came later of course but we had support at the beginning, which I think was really really critical.

Then I met Lexie who was really encouraging and supportive of the work then Lexie joined me so then I was blessed with an incredible cofounder and partner and then I have my best friend as well who was always been a guest speaker in our workshops, who is a squad leader at the summer program. I was very fortunate to have like key team players that I'm still working with today from the very beginning.

Annemarie: I love that and I think because you recognized that there was a huge need out there, I mean that in itself I think is key. Because when you start to be able to have conversations with others, other key stakeholders who can support you, in this instance it was some of the key leaders of the school. When you're able to really voice and communicate that vision and idea that you have in such a way that they can see this is going to impact positively many many lives it makes, it so

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much easier for people to step up and support you and say yes, what do you need, how can we get this done.

Whereas so often I think that whole getting started aspect there may be some things that you not yet clear on that you need to take a step back, get clear on. I'm sure you would have taken the opportunity before you'd even reached out to some of these key stakeholders to talk about it with your colleagues, with your friends. You know what can we do? So you already had some clear ideas on what it was that you hope to achieve. Did you go through that process as well?

Ashley:

Yeah. I mean I didn't know how to do anything I was doing but I knew that I wanted to do it. Because I decided I wanted to be doing all these things, I learned how to do it. The first couple of workshops that we give they had a lot of potential but they weren't very effective in the sense that we've made huge structural changes since then and our workshops run a lot more smoothly and our workshop have just grown so tremendously over the past couple of years. One of the big beliefs that I have is if you don't know something you can learn and that really rang true.

Annemarie:

For that. Yeah. What I love about this as well, I mean what you're just saying just the steps that naturally will flow. Now I'd imagine you could have sat around for a whole week and plan out exactly step by step by step. However, running the workshop, getting these young women in there, getting feedback what worked really well, what can we change, that feedback I'm sure has been incredibly invaluable as you continue to plan and roll out your next workshops.

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Ashley: Yes, for sure. We take feedback really really seriously. I mean that's one of the reasons why MOVE is so effective and the other thing is that something that I've been thinking about a lot lately is how important it is to take the feedback of the middle school and high school aged girls first and foremost. MOVE receives and the work that I do receives a lot of feedback from everyone else, from people that I've never even seen the workshops whether it's criticism or good things. We received a lot of feedback and a lot of attention.

But at the end of the day it's great whatever else thinks. But if you haven't actually been to workshop or you haven't read my book or you haven't been to a summer program then you're not really involved in the work and your feedback just isn't as critical to us making structural changes as it is for the girls who have actually sat in our workshops, the girls who have actually read my book, the boys and everyone else who has actually read my book. Their feedback is the most critical.

I've been thinking about that a lot lately as I consider ways to make changes and ways to grow. I want to take the people who have actually taken the chance to engage with my work. I want to take their opinions and thoughts most seriously because they are the perfect audience.

Annemarie: What an incredible lesson to learn at such, you know, where you are at in your life journey. Because I think that is something that so many of us don't learn till later in life and it's one of those sayings that we're trying to keep everybody happy and please. Yet what's so important I think are the people who you want to serve and support through the programs, the workshops that you want to run.

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Who better than to give you the feedback than those people who you know have been through the program and had obviously are going to help paved the way to really continue to develop the program that new people are stepping in are just going to benefit.

What was it for you then was it sort of like in your heart that you said you know what, these are the people that I'm going to value their support and their feedback and their criticism. Yet the other people not so much. Was it something someone said to you or is it just an insight that an "aha" moment that you had for yourself? The reason I asked you this is because so many of us do worry about what everybody is saying. That distracts us from what we should be focusing and from the action that we should be taking. What would you say has been important for you?

Ashley:

Yeah. I mean it's something that I definitely still struggle with but it's something that I'm getting better at. I think honestly the reason why I'm getting better at that is because I do face so much criticism and feedback from people who have never – you know for example there are random men on YouTube who will make response videos claiming that I don't have enough life experience to be giving a workshop.

I showed the girls at the summer program part of this video and then they give this whole speech about how people are going to tell you that you can't but ultimately you can and girls can. It was like an empowering – it was at the last day of summer program so it was a nice way to wrap it up and to encourage them to chase their dream.

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But the point of the story is that when I showed this video to the girls I asked them directly after I showed them like a minute video. I was like what do you think of that? All the girls were like what. What is this man talking about? You obviously have enough life experience to be giving a workshop. You're running a summer program. And the girls were just like appalled and outraged.

It was kind of a moment where I was like these are the people whose feedback as long as I'm reaching the 7th grade, 8th grade, high school aged girls then that's really all that matters. Because my work is not for, you know, and it can be. It can be. But ultimately at the end of the day my work is mostly for middle school and high school aged girls and that's something that I need...

Annemarie:

That you've lived. That you've seen. That you are there right at the whole phase so to speak with these young women who are going to through this. I have to laugh it when I hear things like that and it's yeah good luck. Sometimes you just got to do to that. If you're getting the right feedback and positive feedback from people who you are supporting then I think all of the other stuff is just noise and learning how to decipher what you should be listening to. Great valuable lessons there.

That then leads us to another point which I think so many people struggle with, and we've touched on this a lot too already in today's conversations around self doubt. I think listening to too many people with too many different ideas and feedback and criticism can really help us doubt the value that we have to offer and have to bring. What would you say has been really crucial for you in helping you continue to confront the self doubt so that you can move forward, take action towards all of your plans and workshop and other programs?

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Ashley:

I think recognizing what you do bring to the table. I'm about halfway into the writing process of my book. I face extreme self doubt coupled with writers block. It was like the lowest point of writing my book where I was just I should not be doing this. I am not qualified. I don't have a college degree. I'm just a teenage girl. Why in the world am I writing a book right now, and why do I think that I have something important to say. I voice this to one of my mentors.

My mentor was like Ashley, are you kidding me? You need to consider what you are bringing to the table because yes, you may not have a degree but that what actually makes you perfectly qualified. You've been out there on the frontline experiencing all this and you're giving them the teenage perspective. I acknowledge that I am not here to give an academic perspective on the issues I'm talking about.

I acknowledge that my perspective is the teenage perspective and it's a research perspective granted it's not coming from an ignorant place. But I needed to value and realize what I brought to the table. So for anyone struggling to confront self doubt, I would honestly suggest that you sit down and you make a list of what you do bring to the table and remind yourself of all of your self-worth and the valuable gifts that you bring because every single one of us does.

I'm religious person and I really do believe that God blesses us all with special gifts and special talents and even if you don't put God into that mix, it's still easy to see that we all really do possess something beautiful that we can bring to the table.

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Annemarie: Yeah. I so agree with that. You know sometimes we consider our gifts and our strengths sometimes they come quite innately. In other words, they come quite easily to us because they are gifts. They're things that we've been gifted. Therefore because they come quite easily to us or naturally to us, we take it for granted.

It's not until we start to even get feedback from other people and listen really listen with an open heart and understanding that when we are giving a compliment or someone says you're so good at such and such often what we do is we just that's easy. What we actually do then is we're denying that particular strength. So I think self awareness is absolutely key.

Something else that you've done too and I wanted to share that with people in case they missed this and they could be a gap in their current leadership is that you've surrounded yourself with key people who support you, who mentor you that enables you to take your strengths to a different level or higher level as well as the people who are supporting you bring other areas of their gifts and their strengths. So together you really can lift each other up. Have you found that to be true too?

Ashley: Yes, so much. One of the biggest things that I really believe and it's the power of especially female collaboration. I feel so lucky that I've been in a position where I've been able to work with all of my best friends. I heard that you should never work with your friends and that might be true for some people. But I could not imagine winning without winning alongside my friends.

I had to do a panel. I didn't have to. I was really excited to do a panel at Yale and I spoke about entrepreneurship and I did it and Lexie wasn't there with me and I

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was just like I wish that she was here. I wish that together we got to win because it so much more incredible when you collaborate with your friends and then you get to share in the successes together.

Annemarie:

Yeah. I think so too. I think even no matter what stage or what age you're at in your business and even in life I think looking at others as competitors is just looking at things so wrong. Is that everyone brings unique gifts and strengths. If you haven't yet identified what yours are, absolutely just do what Ashley said. Write them all down. Get really clear on that. Then surround yourself with other people who complement that and together you can collaborate.

I can't remember who it was that said this but a number of people here in Australia in my networking group said the real strong businesses are the ones who are going to collaborate with other people who bring their unique gifts and skill sets to the table. Together they're going to be able to be far more powerful and bring far more a value to their clients. I absolutely believe that.

I would rather work from or come from a place of collaboration rather than competition because it's so much more fun I think. But you have to be very clear on who it is. Values I think are very important as well. Values are key that your core values are aligned. That's really important too.

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What would you say to a young girl or even a not so young girl who is being held back by fear, who has not yet taken that step to get started on her dream and who maybe have her voice of self doubt stopping her from doing so? What would be some last words of advice you would have for her?

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Ashley: I would say one of the big things that I always tell girls at workshops is that you are a work in progress as is the work you do. You don't need to be like 100% this perfect finished product because you're not. You are learning and growing and changing and that is so beautiful. I think it is important to love yourself and to acknowledge the growth and to appreciate the growth rather than expecting yourself to be 100% perfect all the time.

Just leaving some room for that fear so that way you can tackle it I think is important and to acknowledge that it's okay to have a fear and its okay to have self doubt because you are a work in progress and to forgive yourself for that but also to tackle that and to confront it.

Annemarie: So wise words. I think also too we are always in an area or a state of work in progress and where we will be tomorrow and then the next month when we look back we see we have grown and so on. So I think it's just taking the next action step. How can people get in contact with you and find out more about your summer program and your workshops?

Ashley: Absolutely. You can visit my website ashleyolafsen.com. You can also follow me on Instagram @ashleyolafsen. My book is called Survival of the Prettiest, and it can be found right on Amazon actually. Additionally, we have a MOVE Facebook page. We have a MOVE Instagram that we're going to start updating more frequently.

On my website ashleyolafsen.com there's actually a contact page. So if you're listening please I would love to hear from you. Feel free to reach to me using that contact form and then if you're interested in learning more about my work or you're hearing more about my perspective please feel free to order my book off

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of Amazon. Again it's called Survival of the Prettiest and then let me know what you think.

Annemarie: Fantastic and we'll put all of those details Ashley for you on our show notes annemariex.com/podcast43. Thank you so much for the work that you're doing and with your collaboration partners I think that – oh gosh the message that you're sharing and how you're inspiring and empowering these young women are so important. No matter what age we are I think everything that you've said today we can all take incredible insights to really impact our lives. So thank you so much for coming on the show.

Ashley: Thank you so much for having me. I was really really grateful for this opportunity.

Annemarie: My pleasure.

So if you are the leader in your business and you're going out and you're networking to share your message with potential clients but as that microphone is coming closer towards you when you get that opportunity to stand up and introduce yourself if you freeze, you don't to say, and it comes out in a garble mess then I want to invite you to a breakthrough round table.

Your compelling message, how you can create influence instantly in a noisy marketplace to get you noticed, hired, and paid what you're worth by your ideal client. All you need to do is to find out more and to book your ticket go to annemariex.com/breakthroughroundtable.

That brings us to the end of another show. I know that you have got lots of tips and strategies particularly to help you breakthrough that fear, get courageous, and take that first step as well as overcome self doubt and it is journey. No matter

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what you level you are at in your business and in your life there's always going to be elements of that. I think Ashley brought some great insights and how she's overcoming that and achieving great results so can you.

Please reach out, find out more, and if you've got young daughters please direct them to Ashley's page so they can find out more about the workshops that she is running. If you haven't already subscribed to the show, go ahead and do that because every week we have another inspired guest to share her insights. Annemarietcross.com/podcastitunes. While you're over there if you got a little bit of time, leave a rating and a comment on the show. We want to know how it's impacted your life. Bye for now. See you later, Ashley.

Ashley:

Thank you.

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