

iLLUminate Blog Transcript: Sam Dewalt on Harnessing the Superpower of Authenticity

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- ANNOUNCER: 00:04 [music] This podcast is brought to you by iLLUminate, the Lehigh Business blog. To learn more, please visit us at business.lehigh.edu/news.
- JACK CROFT: 00:17 Welcome. I'm Jack Croft, host of the iLLUminate Podcast for Lehigh University's College of Business. Today is April 25th, 2024, and we're talking with Sam Dewalt, managing director of Lehigh@NasdaqCenter, an exclusive education industry partnership between Lehigh University and the [Nasdaq Entrepreneurial Center](#) in San Francisco. Dr. Dewalt earned a doctorate in organizational leadership from Pepperdine University and completed her doctoral dissertation on authenticity and women in technology leadership. Thanks for joining us on iLLUminate today, Sam.
- SAM DEWALT: 00:57 Thanks, Jack, for having me. I am thrilled to be here.
- CROFT: 01:01 Now, I mentioned in the intro your doctoral dissertation and the issue of authenticity and women in specifically technology leadership in that case. But broadening to women in leadership positions in any kind of entrepreneurial function has been part of your continuing work in your career at the Lehigh@NasdaqCenter. So, I think it would probably be best if we start by defining the role of what being authentic on the job means in this context.
- DEWALT: 01:41 Yeah. That's an excellent question. So at the core, authenticity is really about being true to oneself. It's understanding your core values, your principles and beliefs, and living them out every day through your actions and words, regardless of situations or circumstance. In the workplace, it's also about bringing your whole self to work and recognizing that your personal and professional identities can and should coexist. Now, I always like to caveat that authenticity does not mean that it's OK to be rude and just say what's on the top of your mind without understanding the impact that it might have on others. So authenticity is really a balance, and emotional intelligence plays a really key role when it comes to authenticity. And specifically in the tech sector, the tech sector has a reputation for being inhospitable to women. Women often encounter long-established norms in some predominantly male organizations and believing that they need to conform in order to advance up the corporate ladder. But like all leaders, women really need to be in an environment that allows them to act in a manner that is congruent with their inner values and beliefs. And that's really the inspiration behind my original research and my continued work today.
- CROFT: 03:07 I'm wondering, in terms of your own personal experiences and what you've seen in your own work, what was it that led you to focus on this area in your research?
- DEWALT: 03:22 Yeah. It really was my own experience as a female in the tech sector that inspired me to study this topic. Early in my career, I struggled with self-confidence, like I know many others do starting out. Oftentimes, I was not only the youngest person in the room, but I was also the only female. And if I were to be taken seriously, how was I supposed to talk and act? So in a way, you could kind of say I was having an identity crisis. I also observed other female leaders who I really admired struggling with this too. And so I just became really curious about the experiences of women and minorities in general in predominantly male organizations. And the tipping point for

me really was reading Sheryl Sandberg's book, *Lean In*. I had this aha moment that I had sort of been struggling with this alone and had never really talked about it, shared it. And what Sheryl Sandberg's book did for me was this realization that I wasn't alone, there wasn't something wrong with me, that I wasn't the odd one out, that truly other women had been experiencing similar situations in the workplace and that this was a struggle. So it just was the launch pad really for me to study this as part of my doctoral dissertation. And then through that work, became even more aware of just how important it is, especially in the workplace, to really enable all individuals to bring their best selves to work.

CROFT: 05:01

Yeah. I wonder, you talked about the book being an aha moment for you. And I wonder, as a young woman in the tech industry, were the experiences that you were having, was that something that other women would talk about in the workplace, or was it more that everybody was kind of fighting this on their own?

DEWALT: 05:29

In my experience, it was an individual struggle initially. And when we created the Women in Tech & Innovation course, for example, now this is back in 2017, I had just wrapped my dissertation and research. So it was sort of the perfect time and opportunity. And one of the motivations and inspirations behind creating that course with Professor [Dan Lopresti](#) and [Tom Gillis](#) was the fact that this still was very much a taboo subject, this idea of women in tech, and authenticity is just a thread of that. But part of the inspiration was to raise awareness and have conversation and bring conversation to the forefront so that women don't have to struggle alone and also so that men and others in the workplace could also be allies. So I'd say for me at the time, it was still very much an individual struggle. And I think since, more conversation has been invited and allowed. And I think that's critically important, is step one is sort of the awareness and the education. And then step two is, OK, great, what can we do to overcome some of these challenges and barriers that women face in the workplace? So I think we've made progress in that now it's much less kind of taboo to talk about, and people are more aware. And in general, the topic of diversity and inclusion in the workplace is a critically important one. So yeah, I think I'm hopeful that it's less of an individual battle today than it was when I started out.

CROFT: 07:21

Now, recently, you wrote an article on this topic for [Fast Company](#), and there was a line in there that I really liked that struck me right off the bat here. And that was what you're saying, and I'll quote, "My study proved surprisingly useful, particularly my insights into how a woman can best practice the art of authenticity as if it were a superpower to be harnessed." So what were the insights that you gained from your study concerning how authenticity can be a potential superpower for women in leadership?

DEWALT: 07:56

Yeah. So there's a concept in the research literature known as the female advantage. So women leaders have been found to bring gender-specific capabilities to the workforce like empathy or relationship building. Research, for example, shows that women compared to men tend to be more collaborative and empathetic than directive or autocratic. And the women that I interviewed and the women that come in and speak to our students through the Women in Tech class often talk about-- they might not use the terminology female advantage, but they do talk about the power of being able to harness your unique abilities, your unique strengths, your unique voice to be able to stand out favorably in the workplace. So the ones who did harness their authenticity, meaning that they were able to bring their voice forward and lead in a

way that aligns with their personal values, strengths, so being collaborative as an example, rather than feeling like you need to be more autocratic or directive, in the end, actually paid off for them. And they were able to succeed by being themselves. And so this idea of authenticity as a superpower is the idea that you can succeed by being yourself, but even greater by harnessing your unique strengths and really leaning into that. You can actually be a much more effective leader at the end of the day.

CROFT: 09:40

And another thing that was in your original study and also in the article you wrote for Fast Company was that one of the main takeaways of your research is that authenticity is a skill that can be developed. And that's a very interesting concept. So what are some of the ways that women can develop the skill of authenticity? And are there ways that employers can encourage the development of authenticity on the job?

DEWALT: 10:09

Historically, authenticity has been viewed as a skill-based phenomenon. So you either have it or you don't. And in reality, it's more of a state-based phenomenon in that it can vary based on the specific environment in which a person functions. And through the research, I was able to confirm that an individual's authenticity does develop over time with experience and a greater understanding of self. So that's really where it starts, is developing this greater sense of self. I actually, through the research, developed a framework called the DivA framework to help women develop individual authenticity. And the core components of it are, so one, developing your emotional intelligence. So that's things like self-awareness and self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills.

DEWALT: 11:06

So really focusing in on developing and practicing emotional intelligence is really core to developing your authenticity. Also, understanding this concept of whole self and embracing this integrated self of the personal and professional and not separating out the two or hiding aspects of yourself. One example that came up in my interviews was that women would have to hide the fact that they were leaving work to go watch their child's baseball game, when, in fact, we should celebrate the fact that you can step away for a moment to go watch your child's baseball game and celebrate those important moments in life while still getting the job done and getting the work done. So for me today, being a mom is a critical part of my identity. And I talk about that at work. And in fact, bringing in some of the personal aspects of yourself into the workplace, again, applying that emotional intelligence, can help build greater authentic connections with others.

DEWALT: 12:14

So I connect with others now over my role as being a mom. Two of the other things that I talk about in the research: one, developing a support network. So finding mentors, sponsors, colleagues, even family members who can help you stay grounded in your true self and help you really kind of develop as an individual. I have had incredible mentors and sponsors in my life, both male and female. And the same was true of the women that I interviewed. And the women that come into our class talk about the importance of really developing that support network. We like to call it developing your personal board of directors. And that's something that we actually teach to the students. And then finally, knowing your true north.

DEWALT: 13:08

So your true north is one's guiding compass. It's your passions, your motivations, it's your purpose in life. And being in touch with your authentic self really starts with identifying and sort of defining what that true north is for you. So those are some of

the ways that you as an individual can develop your individual authenticity. And from an employer perspective, I think making it part of your core values in that you want to celebrate diversity and diverse perspectives means creating the space for individuals to bring forward those unique perspectives and identities and creating space for people to integrate their personal and professional life and be their best selves at work. It doesn't just lead to greater individual happiness and psychological well-being. There's actually research to support that it leads to greater organizational performance. So from an organizational standpoint, being able to create the space and support to allow all individuals to be the best versions of their authentic selves makes sense from a business standpoint as well.

CROFT: 14:25

Now, I want to come back to authenticity in just a couple of minutes, but first, I think we should probably talk about your role as managing director of Lehigh@NasdaqCenter. So what is Lehigh@NasdaqCenter and what attracted you to the position as managing director initially?

DEWALT: 14:43

Yeah. So as you shared in the intro, so Lehigh@NasdaqCenter is an exclusive education industry partnership between Lehigh University and the Nasdaq Entrepreneurial Center. That means that Lehigh is the only academic institution that has this institutional level strategic partnership with the Nasdaq Entrepreneurial Center. Our purpose is to accelerate student transformation and societal impact through inclusive entrepreneurship, education, research, and thought leadership. We serve hundreds of students and aspiring entrepreneurs every year through real-world, high-impact programs in the startup ecosystem. And what really drew me to the center is that I'm an entrepreneur at heart, and I am passionate about inspiring others to reach their greatest potential. And education has been a vehicle for me to do that. So it was really sort of blending both my passions and my strengths. I get to build innovative programs that develop future entrepreneurs. So it's very much in line with my true north and the impact that I want to create in the world and my why. So I feel really honored to get to do this work and to work with some absolutely incredible students and people who are mission-driven and making an impact in the world in a variety of ways.

CROFT: 16:15

Now, I know there's a lot of different programs that have been held at the center. And for the purposes here, I think if you could just give us a few examples of some of the flagship programs the partnership offers to help prepare the next generation of entrepreneurs and innovators.

DEWALT: 16:36

Yeah. So you've heard me talk a lot about our Women in Technology & Innovation course, and that has been running since 2017. Some of our flagship programs that we've actually created in partnership with the College of Business is Startup Academy and the Innovation Internship. And these are programs that pair students in internships with early-stage startups. So students are getting that real-world exposure to the startup ecosystem, rolling up their sleeves and diving into real projects with real impact in real companies, oftentimes working beside founders and entrepreneurial leaders. They're learning about how startups operate. They're also learning about themselves, their strengths, their passions, the path that they want to create for themselves in their future. So Startup Academy and the Innovation Internship have been our fastest growing and most successful program to date. Those programs are also supplemented by course curriculum that are taught by Lehigh

faculty. So it's sort of blending the real-world practice with the theory and creating space for the students to apply and integrate both.

CROFT: 18:04

Coming back to authenticity here, and you were just talking about the Women in Technology course, and I'm wondering what the reaction has been, and especially initially when there wasn't as much conversation in both the workplace and academic circles about diversity and inclusion. But what has the reaction been of the students, young female students, who are just starting in this world to what they're learning in Women in Technology?

DEWALT: 18:36

For me, the most inspiring part of this job and of the impact that a course like Women in Tech can have is when we get to read those final reflection papers from students. And they have me in tears because students are having these aha moments similar to the aha moment I had when reading Sheryl Sandberg's book. I was in tears on the beach in Mexico when I was reading this book. And students are having these similar realizations like, "Wait a minute, I'm not alone here." Or they're inspired by these incredible females that come into the classroom and talk about their journeys and have really paved the way for the future generations who are coming up behind them. And so the aha moments, the realizations, the self-actualization that happens through these intimate conversations with female leaders are really powerful in students' ability to make sense of and make meaning of their own experience in the world and start to push them into more of a sense of agency and being in the driver's seat of creating their future as opposed to sort of sitting back and letting it happen to them. And of course, Lehigh students by nature are very driven in that way already. But we've had incredible guest speakers, like [Amy Weaver](#), who's president and CFO of Salesforce, or Ann Lewnes, who's the former executive vice president and chief marketing officer at Adobe [and current vice chair of the Lehigh University Board of Directors], come in and really illustrate how important authenticity is to leaders and especially women and how it really is a superpower that we can harness. So it's those realizations and the inspiration that comes from the conversation that really, I think, helps set students up for success in their personal and professional lives.

CROFT: 20:34

Now, in addition to the Women in Technology course, I'm wondering what are some of the other ways that authenticity is embedded in the programs throughout Lehigh@NasdaqCenter?

DEWALT: 20:47

We talk a lot about, and this is a value that we share with the Nasdaq Entrepreneurial Center, in that it's really about developing the individual entrepreneur from the inside out. So it starts with understanding things like your values, your strengths, your passions, your why, and ultimately, what that true north is. So our curriculum, we have workshops and curriculum that we integrate into all of our programs that start with sort of this internal self-reflection and walking students through exercises like values, strengths, passions, my why, the impact that I want to create in the world. And it starts there. And then we create the space for them to go apply that and sort of craft and develop what their unique entrepreneurial pathway might look like. So for example, we've got workshops focused on entrepreneurial leadership or impact and milestone mapping. And these are workshops that we've delivered to Lehigh students, but also entrepreneurs all around the world. So again, it really starts with understanding your why and that sort of inner self-reflection with the purpose of developing the individual and developing the entrepreneur from the inside out and

helping them connect that to their purpose and their passion and, ultimately, the path that they create for themselves.

CROFT: 22:19

Now, finally, I know we've covered a lot of ground here, but I always like to offer the opportunity that if there's anything else that we haven't talked about that you think our listeners should know about either authenticity in the workplace and/or the Lehigh@NasdaqCenter.

DEWALT: 22:40

Yeah. I think one thing I always like to underscore is that even though my study focused on women in the workplace, I always say when you're doing your dissertation, it's the leaf on the branch on the tree. So you get very specific. And obviously, the women in the workplace and women in leadership and authenticity is something that is near and dear to me. But authenticity isn't gender-based. It's important for everyone, regardless of your background, your gender, your ethnicity. It's important that we allow all individuals to be the best versions of their authentic selves. So it's important for everybody, and it's important for all organizations to recognize and celebrate. And then I guess a final plug, perhaps, for Lehigh@NasdaqCenter, that if you want to discover your authentic self and your why and the way that you can make your unique mark on the world, I would definitely encourage you to check out and apply or register for Lehigh@NasdaqCenter courses and programs. And you'll get to meet some incredible authentic leaders and entrepreneurs and people who are building incredible companies and also build your network of supporters. So we invite you and encourage you to join us on this journey. And Jack, thanks so much for having me on this podcast. It's been wonderful speaking with you. And I hope that maybe it inspires at least one person to kind of lean into and discover their authentic self.

CROFT: 24:21

Great. It's been a real pleasure, Sam. And what you were saying at the end there did spark one other quick question here, and that is the role of Lehigh alumni in the program. Can you talk a little about that?

DEWALT: 24:36

Oh, absolutely. Lehigh alumni are incredible. We wouldn't have a program without our Lehigh alumni. The way in which they pay it forward. And in the world of entrepreneurship, paying it forward is a really important concept in that they come into the classroom and they speak to our students. And they share their journeys, and they inspire our students in so many ways. They serve as mentors to our students. We integrate mentorship into a lot of our programs. The Women in Tech course has had mentorship as a core component from its founding. Startup Academy, a core component of Startup Academy is mentorship. So we have alumni from Silicon Valley and all over serving as mentors to these students. And then now what's kind of exciting is we've been at this long enough that we've had students go through our programs, graduate, launch companies, and they're now hiring our students, which it's this full circle moment, which is really awesome to see. But it's really wonderful when you have a current Lehigh student working with, working for a Lehigh alum that just a few years ago was in their shoes. So yeah, I can't stress enough how important the alumni community is to our students and really the mark that they help make on their journeys.

CROFT: 26:09

I'd like to again thank our guest, Sam Dewalt. And Sam and the staff at Lehigh@NasdaqCenter believe that fostering the entrepreneurial mindset in students from diverse backgrounds and across all disciplines can create the risk-takers and change makers of tomorrow. This podcast is brought to you by iLLUminate, the Lehigh

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