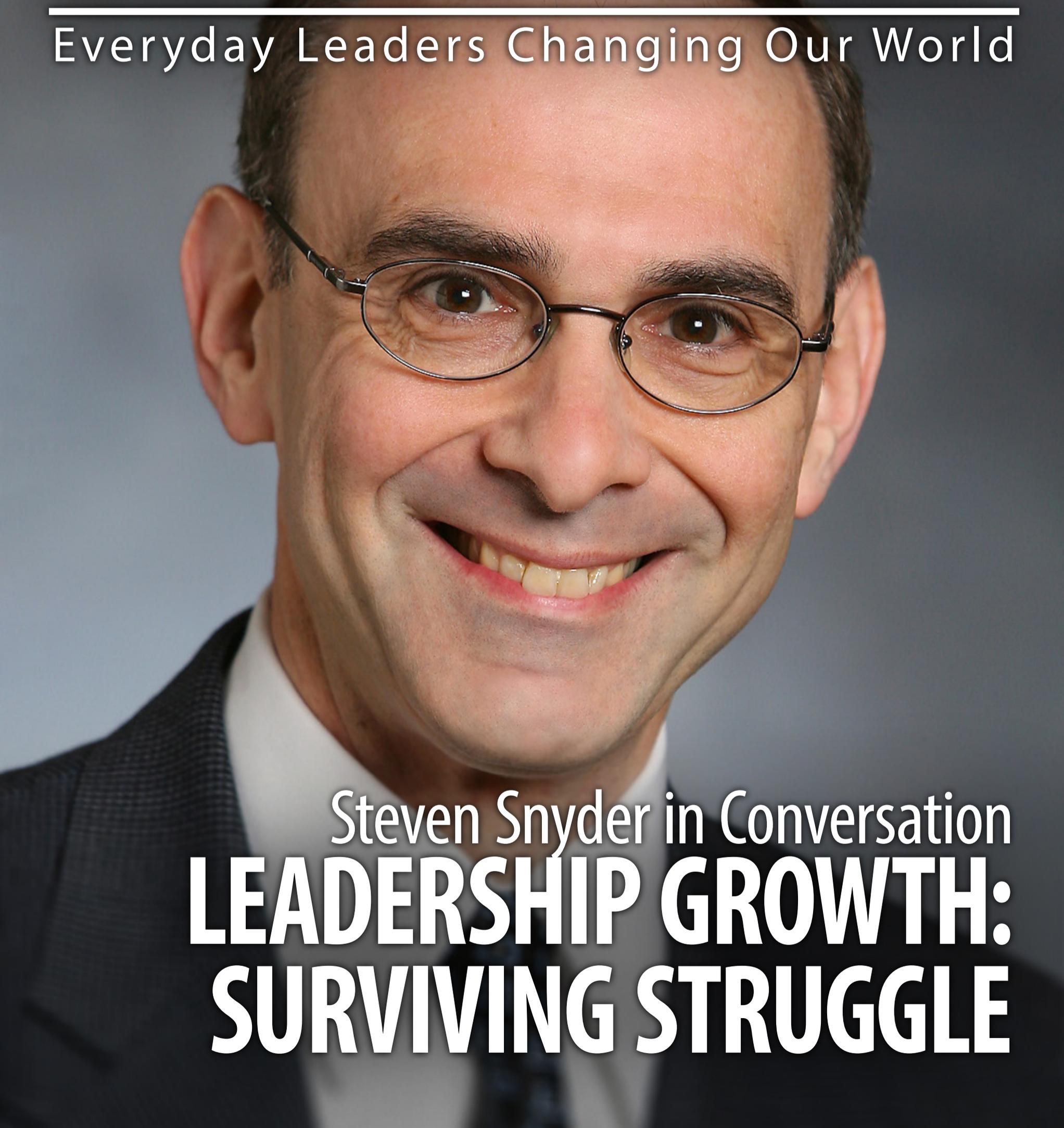


Issue #11

Realizing

LEADERSHIP

Everyday Leaders Changing Our World



Steven Snyder in Conversation

**LEADERSHIP GROWTH:
SURVIVING STRUGGLE**

Realizing Leadership in Conversation

A Conversation with Steven Snyder

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

LW Steven Snyder is joining us today and he's the founder of Snyder Leadership Group, which is an organizational consulting firm that provides a resource for organizations and their executives to advance their leadership capabilities and achieve greater success.

An innovator in thought leadership, Dr. Snyder has developed the breakthrough concepts introduced in his book, *Leadership and the Art of Struggle*, which is based on years of leadership studies, intensive research, and data derived from extensive interviews with real-world executives from major corporations. His advancements in the practice of leadership also derive

from his own leadership experiences as an early leader at Microsoft, where he worked closely with Bill Gates, as well as his experience as a CEO of a publicly held company.

To learn more about Steven, visit his website at SnyderLeadership.com.

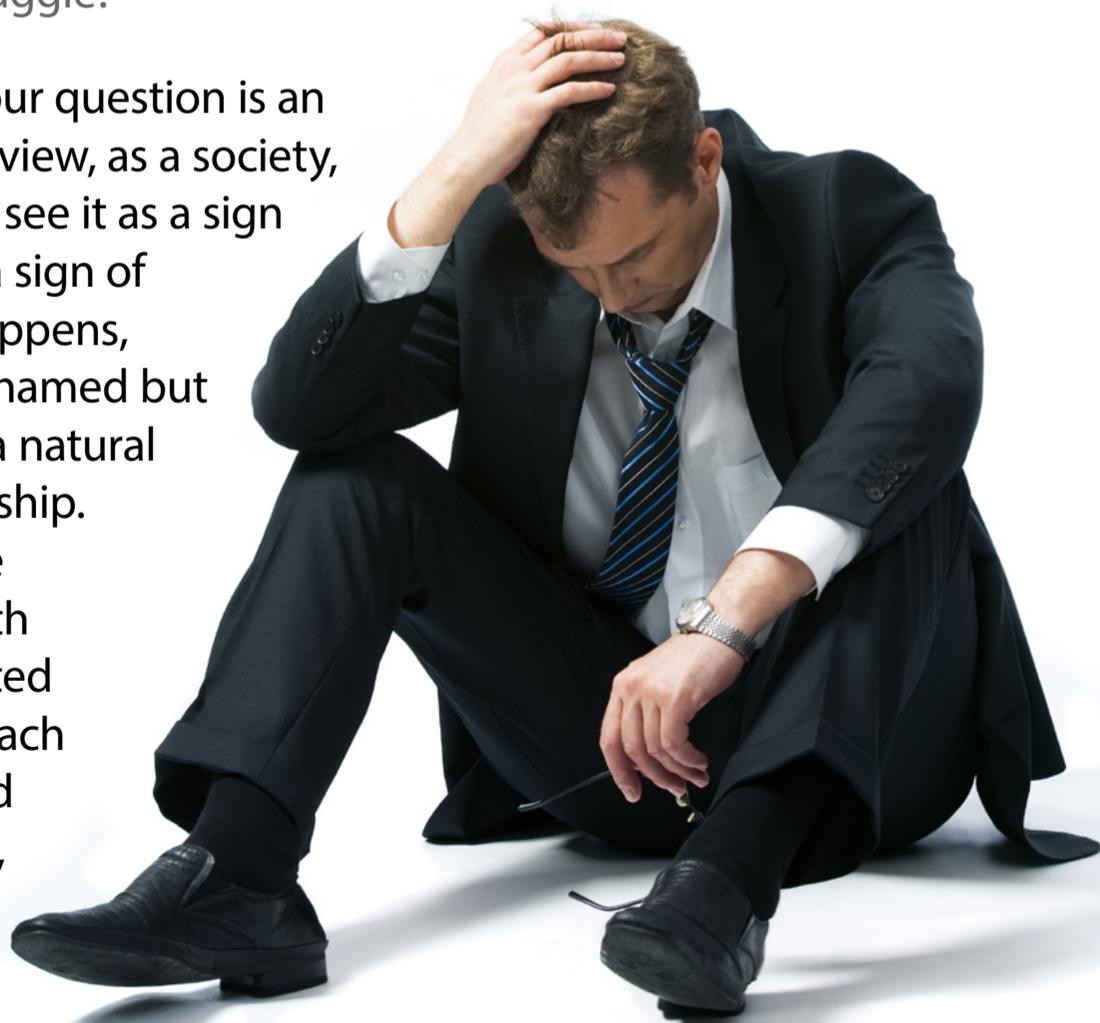
Welcome, Steven, to *Realizing Leadership in Conversation*. I'm really happy to have you as our guest today.

SS Hi Laurie, it's great to be with you today.

LW Thank you. I'd like to start in and talk about struggle.

As a society, we don't like to talk about this. We want to avoid these discussions on adversity, challenges and conflicts, but you decided to write a book about it. Why is it so important for leaders to embrace struggle?

SS Well, Laurie, I think your question is an excellent one because we view, as a society, struggle as a negative. We see it as a sign of weakness. We see it as a sign of incompetence. When it happens, we feel embarrassed or ashamed but the fact is that struggle is a natural and integral part of leadership. I found that in every single conversation that I had with people who were nominated as extraordinary leaders, each and every one of them had their story of most intense, challenge and adversity.





Few people even realize that this is a natural part of leadership and the book really brings this out. It allows us to recognize and come to terms with something that we've been denying or running away from is actually an integral part of the process of leadership. Once we do that, once we come to the realization, once we come to that awakening, we begin to embrace the struggle when it's happening to us.

Now, one of the people I interviewed said no one wakes up and says, *"I wish I could have a struggle today."* When it happens, we need to pay attention to it. We need to recognize it's happening and we need to embrace the opportunity because with every struggle comes an opportunity for learning and growth. I think that's the most important take-away from the book: When we stop thinking about struggle as something to be embarrassed about or a sign of weakness but instead accept it as a natural part of leadership, we open ourselves up to the learning opportunities that the struggle gives us. That is what the book is about.

LW What I liked about it is that you did, and what you said just now, you mentioned that struggle is natural. We're supposed to have struggle. Sometimes our biggest struggle is fighting not to have any!

SS Indeed. That's one of the struggles.

LW Now, you took struggle and dissected it in a way that can be understood and actively mastered. Could you describe please those elements of struggle that you identified?

SS The thing that kept popping up in the interviews that I did, and I studied a total of ninety-three leaders and 151 episodes of struggle, and from these stories and from the narratives, three elements of struggle came to light as things that were evident in every story that I heard.

First, something was changing. Second, that created a set of tensions. And third, those tensions threw the leader off balance.

When we recognize those three conditions, something is changing. Well, it could be a new job - you're in a new job and that's the change. Or it could be that the environment is changing, something a competitor did or somebody slapped you down by giving you candid feedback and that hurt and that was the change. Something changed.



That change created the set of tensions that then threw us off balance and it's really, really important to recognize because most of the people I interviewed didn't recognize that they were off balance at the time. If we can sensitize ourselves to understanding it, paying attention that we're out of balance and the imbalance could be emotional, like you could feel angry or you could feel sad or depressed or filled with self-doubt. Or the imbalance could be physical - your sleep patterns could be interrupted or as one female executive told me that she was so stressed that her hair started falling out. Or the imbalance can make you do crazy things in relationships - you may lash out in anger and destroy and undermine the very relationships that are so important to you. Or the imbalance could be spiritual - an inner crisis of purpose and meaning.

What's so important is to pay attention to that signal that you're out of balance and when you realize that, when you pay attention to that, then you can begin to engage consciously and intentionally in the mastery practices that are outlined in the book.



LW So when you talk about change, that's really the external factor that we can't avoid then you go into dealing with it internally and challenging ourselves instead of trying to deal with the external right away?

SS You know, that's an excellent question because the change doesn't need to be an external change. It could be a change inside that somehow you wake up and you suddenly see the situation differently than you did before. Now, that change could be prompted by external factors but the change that you're feeling could actually be an inner change.

LW Interesting. Now you have in your book a terrific number of tools and practices that we can use and implement to work through our struggles and deal with these better. They're not external tactics but they're the internal things you've already referred to and they empower. There are two things I wanted to ask you about, specifically, the first one is self-awareness. How does self-awareness help leaders deal with struggle?

SS Before I get into that, I'd like to clarify the practices. I'm not sure if I'd agree with the characterization that they're internal as opposed to external tactics because these, and I would call them practices, engage us with the world around us in different ways and so they're not purely internal. They are practices which allow us to engage with the world around us in ways which we might not have considered before. Looking for and searching for the support that we need, for example, or engaging in conversations with people who may be at a different level than we have in the past or in a different way than we have in the past and so these practices are not strictly internal practices. They're different ways of engaging within ourselves and with the world around us.



But you're absolutely right - self-awareness is key to all of this and we say the word self-awareness a lot but, as I've read through all of the leadership literature around self-awareness, I've not found the set of tools to help us become more self-aware until I read Kahneman's book, *Thinking Fast and Slow* and he talks about the automatic mind and the reflective mind. When I superimposed Kahneman's framework onto the stories that I was hearing and the advice I would be giving to the players as they would be struggling through their stories, it was this framework, understanding the automatic mind,

our thinking processes that come to us automatically that we don't pay conscious attention to. The reflective mind, on the other hand, is much more intentional, much more conscious, much more deliberate but the problem is that it's a lazy bugger.

What we need to do is to train that reflective mind to take control, to intervene because the automatic mind, while it's good at some things, it can get us into a lot of trouble. It can cause us to perpetuate these blind spots that are getting us deeper and deeper into maladaptive and dysfunctional behaviour.

When we train our reflective mind to take control, to say, "Whoa! Let's stop and take a look at this. Let's take a look at it as if we're looking at the situation, at ourselves, from the balcony as opposed to looking at it from the lens that that we normally see." When we train our reflective mind to take control like that, then we open ourselves up to a whole new set of possibilities. This self-awareness comes as a result of training our reflective mind to take control and, again, that's the master practices that are in the book.

LW Looking at the second element that I wanted to ask you about is the adaptive energy. Can you describe that and how a leader will benefit from this?



SS Adaptive energy is really central to navigating through difficult and challenging situations because our automatic mind is going to cause us to go into dead ends, to be maladaptive, to be dysfunctional. What we need to do is we need to embrace and open ourselves to this quality that I believe is within all of us, which I call adaptive energy.

Adaptive energy allows us to tap into our inner selves and really create a pathway that's more functional, that's more relevant to our passions, to our mission, to our vision. It really engages all of these elements that our automatic minds have squashed and our adaptive mind helps us navigate creatively and constructively through the pitfalls, the fears, the dysfunction that allow us to deal with a new situation in a more healthy way and more constructively and avoid those dysfunctional behaviours, I call them maladaptive behaviours. In the book I talk about a whole bunch of maladaptive behaviours which are primarily driven by our fears and by our automatic patterns or habits that we need to break ourselves out of.

LW My last question for you is: can the art of struggle be mastered?

SS That's a really great question, Laurie. It's really all about the journey. It's really all about the journey towards mastery and in the end, whether it can or can't be mastered is something that I'll leave open to my readers. What's important is to engage in the journey and the reason that I called it an art is two-fold.

The first thing is art is a creative form of expression and it's a form of expression that we don't generally think about in business. What I think is so important is we find ways of



expressing ourselves, constructively and adaptively that may not have been avenues that we have previously expressed ourselves because we haven't had the toolset.

And the second reason I call it an art, in addition to the fact that it's a creative process of self-expression, is that an art requires practice. Now, I'm a piano player and they say it takes ten thousand hours to master an art like mastering the piano and I practice nowhere near that. What I can tell you is that the more I practice, the better I get. And that's why I use the "art" metaphor because it really is a creative form of self-expression that requires a disciplined form of practice.

It's a journey and when we reframe struggle, not as this negative that society has trained us to, but rather this incredible, wonderful, creative journey that allows us to engage in new ways, we actually find that there were gifts hidden in our struggles that we wouldn't have seen otherwise. They're gifts to learn, to grow. They're gifts of connecting with people in different ways, more healthy and more adaptive ways, and they're also ways of realizing a sense of fulfillment and gratification from the journey itself and that's what *Leadership and The Art of Struggle* is all about.

LW That's great - it's really smart. I read through the book a few times, actually, because there's so much in there. Every time I enjoyed it and every time I added more and more highlighter into my book.

SS Well, thank you Laurie, that's great to hear. Bill George wrote this in the forward that the more you read the book you actually see those nuance things and quite frankly, I've become a student of my own work - there are times when I pull the book out as well!

LW Yes, there's some great, great stuff in there and over and over again - it's practical, you can use it and reflect on it too. I also found when I was reading the book I actually had to put it down because I had to think about it before I keep going. I enjoyed it tremendously. Thank you for teaching, thank you for writing it and, Steven, thank you for spending some time with us today. I truly appreciate it.

SS And thank you, Laurie, for reaching out and making this conversation possible.

LW Thank you.

