Welcome to another summer edition of the Sawyer Business School Amplification Avenue Podcast. This is Skip Perham from the marketing program at Suffolk University in Boston, and I'm happy to bring you yet another conversation about the amplifying properties of sports, and the convergence of sports business, the media, and society. As always, the mission of this podcast is to push beyond the headlines, to dig deeper into where sports and society intersect. In this episode, I'm happy to talk about the dynamics of coaching with an associate from Suffolk University, Dr. Lauren Hajjar, Assistant Professor in the Sawyer Business School Institute for Public Service. Lauren is an expert in organizational change, culture, and relational practices that support high performance teams, high performing teams, and organizations. Lauren works directly with managers and frontline staff to understand what's holding them back from achieving their goals, and then helps them use relational analytics and other data to course correct for high performance. She's an active consultant, and she can help any sports organization, or any organization, for that matter, leverage relational analytics and other strategies for high performance. You can contact her at Lauren Hajjar, that's lhajjar@suffolk.edu. Thanks Lauren for taking the time. Thanks for having me on this morning, Skip. Happy to be here. You're welcome. I'm very excited to have you on board, because we're gonna use today as a proxy for our conversation. And I hope this isn't too much inside baseball as we're both here in Boston, and Suffolk is here in Boston. But the recent firing, or the recent six weeks old at this point, but I think it has relation to coaches anywhere, at any level, across the country, globally, what have you. Wan to use the firing of former Bruins coach, Bruce Cassidy, as a proxy for our conversation. And Lauren, I know you have some opinions on that. And I think from a general sense, the sports fan here in Boston, or even many sports fans,
many hockey fans, question,
here's a guy who had a six plus 670 winning percentage,
was a win away from the Stanley Cup, but he got fired.
They're a little bit confused in that,
and I know you have an interesting perspective,
and your sentiment is, it was the right decision,
and that's based on your research, your expertise.
So, let me jump in here.
The old bastard in me, and yes,
I've actually written that down here.
The old bastard in me wants to say
that Bruce Cassidy's firing is a direct result of that,
"Everybody gets a trophy", mentality that, as a Gen X,
I think, I apply, you know,
as I see my kids grow up rightly or wrongly.
But you're an organizational change and culture expert.
I want you to educate me and our listeners on why I'm wrong.
It's a very interesting topic, Skip,
lots of change happening for the Boston Bruins.
And I have to say,
I, as a researcher who focuses on organizational change,
and practices that support high performing teams,
I'm excited for the Boston Bruins,
and I applaud upper management
for looking beyond the numbers,
and making decisions based on
their organizational culture and needs.
And I, you know, I'll also share before I launch in here,
you know, I have access to the same information
and data as you, I'm not an insider to the Bruins.
I'm following the same media stories
with access to the same player and team stats
as everyone else.
My background and expertise, however,
in organizational culture and change allow me
to view some of this data through a different lens.
And I do see why this has been confusing to fans.
You know, look,
you get a guy who has an incredible track record on paper,
246 wins, a plus 600 winning percentage,
six consecutive seasons in the playoffs,
and one trip to the Stanley Cup finals, right?
The data suggests he's good at his job, if not great.
And why would players be complaining about this?
What's going on here?
Is there a disconnect between owners and management, maybe?
A New Yorker roster, that's definitely not helpful, right?
- Mm hm, mm hm.
- But it's more complex than that,
and a deeper dive into organizational culture
does offer an explanation.
- Okay.
- So, when we talk about organizational culture,
we're talking about the policies, the practices, and values that inform and guide and reinforce the actions of its members, its employees, its players, its coaches. It runs through every level of the organization. And so let's start with what we know. With some of the data that offers some insights into what's going on here looks like. So, Cassidy has documented issues with many players. A recent interview with sportscaster, John Buccigross, highlighted this pretty well. Issues around psychological safety in particular. He questioned whether younger players are feeling comfortable speaking up to anyone, a agent, coach, et cetera, noting the communication skills and people management skills for some have been difficult to deal with, and that there's this running commentary on the bench. And players are sometimes hearing, and thinking to themselves, "Jeez, I wonder what he's saying about me when I'm on the ice." - Mm hm. - You know, so, then you look at the motivational tactics he's using and, you know, in exit interviews, players are noting that it's harsh. And, so, this data starts to shed light on the lack of psychological safety presence in the organization, at least between players and coaching staff. You know, and then gut Cam Neely, who has also made public comments about players being, quote unquote, "Afraid to make mistakes under his leadership." - Mm hm. - So, beyond those data points, you know, he's known to bluntly point out the mistakes of his players rather than offering a constructive reflection of the game during press conferences. (chuckles) There was one press conference in April, I think it was April, where he called players out individually on plays that were quote, "Not intelligent hockey." Now, so, this type of behavior runs contrary to what we know about practices that support high performing teams. - Mm hm. - So, you've got trend data here through exit interviews, and observations of Cassidy's behavior and approach in press conferences, on the bench, et cetera. And it all points to issues that impact the conditions under which players can and will perform optimally. So, that's what we're talking about here today. - Mm hm, mm hm, and creating a psychological safe environment also means that the employee has the confidence
that they can speak to others,
even management, without fear of retribution.
One of the idioms I used in a previous life
as a way to challenge authority openly,
was to use this saying that,
"I know I'm taking just enough rope to hang myself."
'Cause I knew that I was pushing past a boundary
that maybe others wouldn't,
and I'm not trying to make myself a hero,
but if I had something to say, I wanted to say it.
So, I would use that, sort of, as a hedge.
But in that case, I felt comfortable enough.
Is that an example of, there was an environment
where I felt like I could do that?

And, so, is that psychological safe environment
one that allows the player to go above the coach
without fear of reprisal,
or even a captain or something like that?
- Yeah, so great question, Skip.
Psychological safety, first off, is, you're right,
it's present when an individual can speak up
without the consequence of punishment or humiliation,
and is also a well established driver of team performance.
And the research is very clear on that.
A fear of communicating directly,
and speaking up to someone in a higher level position,
is a problem in many organizations.
And it matters just as much, for instance,
flight captains in the airline industry,
and executives in financial services,
as it does for providers on the front line of a hospital,
or even players in a professional sports club.
So, I'd like to clarify one misconception
about psychological safety,
and then it, kind of, relates,
and I'll answer the question about your specific situation.
Safety is not the same thing as comfort.
- Mm hm.
- And, so, you can be uncomfortable in the workplace,
and you should, this is how we learn and grow.
- Mm hm.
- And it has to be done safely.
So, think stretch, but not strain.
So, it's like going to the gym, and building body strength.
You're going to, you know,
you're not gonna do the same exercises over and over again.
It would be comfortable for you to do that,
but your muscles won't grow.
It's the same thing here, individuals on teams
have to experience that discomfort,
you know, to learn and innovate,
but have to be able to do so in a way that they won't be
punished or humiliated for it.
- If they make mistakes.
That's right.
Yeah.
And so we see that, kind of, pop up, in these data points around Bruce Cassidy's narrative. Regarding your own, you know, thinking there, I guess I, without knowing all the details of the context and situation, you know, if you are referencing the fact that you might end up hanging yourself, is that truly psychologically safe, or are you simply taking a risk, and there is a difference.

So, in a high trust environment, you might feel comfortable taking risks, but psychological safety means you will not be punished or humiliated if something fails or goes wrong. So, let's say you have a new idea you wanna pitch to your team or boss, you take the risk, you speak up, your boss gives you the go ahead, take it and run with it, but then you implement your new project, and it flops. What happens then?
Do you get fired, demoted, or dinged on your next performance eval? Or, you know, is there a team process, as part of your organizational culture, where you engage in reflective debriefing, where you identify what went wrong, you course correct as a team and so on. So, it's not about just you, Skip, as an individual employee, but it's about the shared belief held by all team members that it's safe to take risks without getting beat up by your team if things go wrong.

What's interesting, and I think about that situation. The big boss at that time wasn't the GM of the station that I worked at, who was a great guy. His boss would say, "Fail fast," right? - Yes. - And if we're gonna do it, let's do it, learn and then move forward. So, I do like that.

And that's not, wasn't original to him by any means, but that sounds like that's establishing a psychological safe environment where we're going to do things, we're gonna do it fast, it succeeds, it fails, we evaluate, we learn, and then we push forward, and we do it all over again. So, I do like that.

So, this is more than about Bruce Cassidy or any coach deploying tough love strategies. That's, sort of, outdated, I think, based on, you know, your research. But, so, does this relate to any differences
in the generational cohorts who are Generation X
versus millennials, and Generation Z?

Does it relate anything to that,
to the differences in generational cohorts?

- So, yes, and yes.

So, let me address the first part of your question there.

Yes, the top down, you know,
command and control approach
is quickly becoming outdated.

Let me first, like, the term "tough love" is tricky, right?
Because it means different things to different people.

And we're hearing that,
shortly I've heard that lately in the context
of the Boston Bruins with specific players,
quoting "Needing some tough love," right?

- Mm hm.

Tough love suggests you can be tough and loving.
Yet, the word love suggests an ability to connect to,
and understand the person you are with
leading and mentoring.
And that does not describe the coaching style
of Cassidy, because if you can't understand the needs
of individuals on your team,
then it's just toughness and hardness without the love.
So, that's one thing.
Tough love, that saying,
it's not a license to be a jerk.
- Right. (laughs)

So, to answer your question, you know,
from a human resource management lens,
yeah, it's important to understand the needs
of generational cohorts more broadly.
For instance, how rewards and accountability systems
motivate generational cohorts in the workplace.
But you also need to be tuned in to the needs
of individual employees, or in this case, players.
And the importance of the latter dates back
to the work of a woman named Mary Parker Follett,
who was an American management consultant,
philosopher, and pioneer
in the organizational theory behavior fields
in the late 1800s and early 1900s.
And she's referred to as the mother of modern management,
because instead of emphasizing industrial
and mechanical components of the work,
she focused on human relationships
as a fundamental aspect of industry.
And she specifically looked at the individual parts,
employees, individual employees
in relation to the whole team or organization.
So, this idea that quality of relationships is important
to organizational culture and achieving desired outcomes
is not new, yet it's been overlooked at times,
And, so, you know, in Cassidy's case, he wasn't able to connect with the whole team, and that was a problem.

I wanna draw a contrast actually, as we bring this up, to Tampa Bay Lightning coach, John Cooper.

His winning percentage and stats are comparable to Cassidy's. He's a great coach.

What's the difference? His coaching ability has, at times, been referred to as the secret sauce.

And yet, like, from my perspective, there's nothing secret about it. The data is there, it's pretty clear.

He has the knowledge and expertise of the game itself, but he also has the ability to connect with all types of players, and that's been a critical part of his success.

So, he's known to be curious, which is an important relational quality, and needed to connect, not only in to individuals on a team, but to make connections between members of a team.

He's known too, for example, I think this one's kind of interesting, he's known to listen to the same music as his players, because, and according to him, if you're not, you can't figure them out.

So, this idea of just connecting and tuning in to the mindset of his players is important.

He's also known to maintain composure, and not lose his mind, for instance, over an offsides call in the first period.

And that seems to be appreciated and reassuring to his players.

And he also knows how to get the most out of his players in different ways.

And importantly, his players want to play for him.

So, you got a guy like Pat Maroon, who's gone to the Stanley Cup finals for four straight seasons, winning three of them, and he's saying that his coach made him a better player.

And formally, he was self-described as being overweight and slow.

So, you know, his players want to play for him.

And, so, this Cooper contrast is, yeah, it's interesting because,

you know, look at the data over the course of the regular season.
Tampa Bay and Boston both won 51 games. And, so, if you're looking at the numbers alone, they're in the same division, same schedule. - Mm hm. Boston loses in the first round, Tampa Bay goes on to the final. There's something different there. And it's like when the game mattered the most, they performed at different levels, the teams and coaches. And so I would argue, Skip, that's when the John Cooper's not-so-secret sauce becomes a bigger factor. - Mm hm, mm hm. So, the secrets are there, and this is a perfect segue into the next topic, and the other one of the constructs of your research. It sounds like Cooper has great relational coordination with his players, and I may not be using that, right? And this isn't, you know, being nice to his players, but the idea of understanding his players, each individual player, and asking things like, you know, what do you need to bring your best self to the ice? And then questions that really require a coach to lean in to their own deficiencies, you know. What do I do as your coach that is not helpful? And the converse is, you know, what do I do as a coach that is helpful? It sounds like Cooper has that, so, explain that in more detail, the relational coordination concept, and how Cooper uses it, or is successful at it, and Cassidy was not. - Sure, yeah, so, relational coordination is a theory, a change method, and measurable. And it's not about personal relationships, nor is it about, as you said, coaches being nice to players. It's about role-based relationships, shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect, supported by communication that is sufficiently frequent, accurate, timely, and problem solving oriented. And the science of relational coordination in over 233 studies since 1991, show that teams with better relationships and communication achieve better outcomes. And, you know, it doesn't come naturally to all leaders. It's been studied in 36 different countries, and in 73 industry contexts, both public and private. It can be measured, as I said. And the reason why it's not about coaches being nice to players, is because there's a science to it, relating and communicating.
And it's about role-based relationships, so, it's not personal. With the structures in place to support high levels of relational coordination. So, I think a good example to make this point is New England Patriots coach, Bill Belichick. We don't see him being particularly nice, right? He's a rather direct communicator, rather stoic—Super grumpy dude. Yet he connects well with his team at the individual level as well as the whole team. And the expression, "Do your job", resonates throughout the Patriots organization. And there's a reason for that, because everyone is expected to show up, whether you're a coach, player, staff, or otherwise, understand your role, how it impacts the whole team, and do your job. He's also known to hold his players accountable to do their job. So, it's not about being nice, it's about being clear and transparent in your communication, and understanding the whole, in relation to the individual parts, and making connections between them.

You asked about—Do you—Yeah, go ahead. No, you keep going, keep going. Well, you asked about some questions, like, how do you bring your best self to the ice, I think, and those are strategies, examples of strategies that can be used to help build relational coordination. And it's an approach that I've seen, I've taken my research, but it's about collecting and using data around organizational culture and change, and using the data to understand where to build the relational and communication ties. So, if you're a player, and you're answering the seven item survey, relational coordination survey, you'd be answering questions, like, you know, the extent to which I as a player share the same goals as the coaching staff, the extent to which coaches and owners share knowledge with one another. And, so, what you get is a network map, and a breakdown of where the strong, moderate, and weak ties are. Mm hm. And it can help leaders and managers understand where to focus their attention and efforts. And, so, there comes the questions about, what do you need to bring your best self to the ice?
How do I as a coach - Mm hm.
How can I be most helpful to you, and vice versa.
Right.
And that's an approach,
some of that's rooted in a humble inquiry,
which is the process of asking questions in a way
that empowers the individual,
the other individual, in the conversation,
and is a useful strategy.
So, if you're asking those questions on the front end,
then that should reflect positively
in that seven question survey that makes up these,
you know, relational coordination construct.
Well, I would say that you could use them,
if you were to use them sequentially,
you might collect data
using the seven item survey instrument first,
and then use the humble inquiry or other relational approach
to address the weaker ties.
The deficiencies they see. - Correct, yeah.
Yeah, okay, all right.
Do you use this with students at all
in the classroom as you-
I do! - Try and manage a classroom
of 30 kids, and some perform well, some don't,
and as you try to determine
what's not working in the areas that, you know,
where the kids who maybe are struggling?
Yeah, that's a good question.
I do use it in the classroom,
and I use it in my HR course too.
I teach students how to do what's called relational mapping,
and, so, they end up mapping out work processes
in their own organizations that they're working in.
And then we talk about the humble inquiry,
and the different relational strategies
that can be used to build
the relational aspects of the work,
and build relational capacity within the organization.
So, we do use it, we do some role playing.
So, they get to experiment with what it feels like
to ask some of these questions,
and how to analyze the data, and make sense of it.
So, yeah, we do use it in that way,
and it's definitely,
it's a helpful practice on a personal level too.
A lot of people will tell you that, I think.
Mm hm, mm hm, all right, a couple more questions here.
We're gonna get into
the nitty gritty of this issue
as it relates to Bruce Cassidy,
and a couple examples.
And if you're from Boston, you know the name Jake DeBrusk,
He asked out in the middle of the season, he's 25 years old, he was drafted with the 14th pick in the 2015 draft, his career bests are 27 goals, and 43 points in a season. Oh, by the way, now that Cassidy is gone, he's rescinded his trade request. Convince me that a psychologically safe locker room, and frequent timely constructive communication will help DeBrusk reach the levels of a guy who was drafted just before him, four spots, Mikko Rantanen, who plays for the Stanley Cup champion, Avalanche, who has a max, you know, has a best season of 90 points, and just won the cup. So, convince me that Jake DeBrusk is not a lost cause, and these strategies can help improve his performance, and ultimately the team's. Yeah, that's really good question. I think the DeBrusk situation is interesting for a couple reasons. First that, you know, the media's focus on DeBrusk's relationship with Cassidy, largely overshadowed the fact that multiple players, many young, but also veteran players, reported a disconnect with Cassidy. So, I think that's an important point. But if you're asking me, if I think DeBrusk has potential that has not been fully tapped, then I would say, yes, it's absolutely possible. And here's why. If you look at his stats, you see that as the season went on, he got better. He comes on strong late in the season. And the timing of this is curious. It was right after the trade deadline. So, after not being traded, there's no uncertainty left in his season. He knows he is with the Bruins. He goes out and scores basically a point a game for the last 15, 16 games of the season, right? And I think there were three or four games he didn't score, all in April, and the Bruins didn't win any of them. So, to your question, if he were in a more comfortable environment, and directed by a coach who was connected with the whole team, not just the subset, I don't think it's unreasonable to see him scoring 80 to 90 points in a season. Clearly there's potential here. And I guess the real question is, who's able to tap into it? Mm hm, mm hm. And then, yes. Yeah, fingers crossed on that.
'Cause the Bruins are gonna need that scoring, although I think he's out until at least some point into the season. So, it sounds like, let's take it, that Jake will thrive, and wants to be coached, and shares the same goals, and is on board. Let's flip to another sport and another player, which is a bit unfair, but I wanna go down this road anyway, because he's made news. It is Kyrie Irving, and he said he doesn't need a coach. And, you know, has reportedly ran his own practices after his current coach, Steve Nash, ran his practice. How can his coach use, you know, relational coordination to ensure that this player, Kyrie Irving, supports the organization's goal? 'Cause it doesn't seem like this player, again, Kyrie Irving, is on board with the team's goals. Are there going to be some employees, some players that you just can't reach? - Yeah, it's a good question. You know, the Irving situation is a good example of how an individual employee's behavior can impact an entire team. I don't think we can compare it to the Jake DeBrusk situation. I think it's apples and oranges, but, you know, he's an accomplished player, his behavior is a distraction to the entire team with multiple teams he's played for, right? And individual players who are a distraction on teams can definitely impact the organizational culture. Within the research, there are a number of organizational practices that can sometimes fall into a broader category of human resource management practices that support high quality relationships and communication. And one of them is having an accountability system that works. So, you know, player conduct policy, you know, how is that written? How is that interpreted? How is that managed, right? This example is reminding me of, you know, Wes Welker, back in 2011 making some off comments to the press about another coach. - Rex Ryan, yeah, yes. (chuckles) - Yeah, and, Bill Belichick benching him during the playoff game, the beginning of the playoff game. And, you know, that's the message from Belichick there. Was this is not how we do things. And he, you know, feels strong.
You know, there's an expectation in that organizational culture that we do not tolerate distractions, especially when it comes to the media, right? And, so, this is an organizational culture issue. And, so, you know, I think this is also a good example that highlights the value of using relational data.

On an ongoing basis within your organization to inform your decisions about who to keep, who to let go of, who to recruit, into the club.

The Bruins have hired a new coach, and it's an interesting choice.

It's a hockey guy, he's been around for a long time, I think he's a Maine guy, or at least played in Maine, the University of Maine.

Jim Montgomery has an interesting backstory.

He's, you know, he's recovering from a substance abuse issue.

What's your take on, Jim, you know, neither of us know him personally, but what's your take on his backstory, and, I guess, maybe how it might be beneficial for the Bruins as they build the bigger, better relationships with their employees across the organization?

- Yeah, this is an interesting story as it keeps unfolding, Skip, because Jim Montgomery was hired for the very same reason that Cassidy was fired. Connection, and throughout his interview process, Montgomery emphasized his ability to connect with all players, clearly something the front office values, and knows is important to the success of the organization.

Look, I don't wanna speculate much on his personal situation. That said, the media coverage, including his own public comments around having been through a recovery program for alcohol addiction is an interesting part of the story, because there are some professionals that would say that the opposite of addiction isn't sobriety, but it's, in fact, connection.

And that addiction is not about the pleasurable effects of substances, it's about the user's inability to connect in healthy ways with others.

So, the hiring of Jim Montgomery is interesting in that way. He's recently come clean, and is emphasizing his ability to connect with all types of players.

A quality that is necessary to manage the changing composition of the Bruins, and to get the most out of individual players.
And I'm excited, I'm excited to see how it plays out, and what lies ahead for the Boston Bruins. They started, the key word is, they've started, to make decisions in a way that aligns with the research on how high performing organizations operate.

And at the same time, they still have their work cut out for them, and they'll have to be very intentional about how we move forward from here. Cool, well, the interesting thing is we're gonna get a good look, right? Cassidy has a job with Vegas, so, we're gonna be able to look at their, you know, obviously have data from their past performance, and we'll see how their performance improves, or doesn't improve based on his coaching acumen, and all of what you've talked about, and then compare it, you know, compare Jim Montgomery. So, it'll really be interesting to see here. That's the beauty of sports is, you know, you're always getting those measurables, you're always getting that data, at least from a wins and losses, and a whole host of other metrics. So, that's cool.

Lauren, I wanna thank you again. I know you're on vacation, you're in Canada, you're working out of a co-work space, so thanks for taking the time to talk with us. For more information about how to use relational analytics and other strategies, you can contact Lauren. Again, that's lhajjar@suffolk.edu. A note to any sports organization in Boston, Bruins, Celtics, Red Sox, whatever. But Lauren is Boston based, so an easy trip for her. Thanks again, Lauren, for joining us today. - Thanks for having me, Skip. Take care.

Enjoy the rest of your vacation. Before signing off here, let me just tell you about our sponsor, Suffolk University. At Suffolk University, Sawyer Business School, you are steps away from life changing internships, career connections, and Fortune 500 companies. Our classroom experiences are enhanced by our location. We're in the center of downtown Boston, which means you'll be right in the middle of innovation, and the city's financial center. Sawyer Business School offers both undergraduate business programs.
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Thanks again to Lauren for joining us.
I think this is episode seven of season two.
I do expect that we'll have one more summer episode before the fall, so I'm excited about that.
You can look for that.
A thank you to all of our listeners for taking in another episode of the Amplification Avenue Podcast presented by Suffolk University.
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I probably don't say that enough, but if you do share, and you rate it, and do a comment, that obviously rates well with these podcast services.
But until the next time, as always, I look forward to talking to you and with you again in the near future, thanks.