



Viewing Leadership from a Host Metaphor

Guest was Mark McKergow

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# Using a Host Metaphor for Leadership

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## ***Transcription of Interview***

**Joe:** *Welcome everyone. This is Joe Dager, the host of the Business901 podcast. With me today is Mark McKergow. Mark is an author, facilitator, and consultant and can be found at Sfwork.com; the Centre for Solution Focus at Work. I first ran across Mark from his book *The Solution Focus*, but I recently read a new book of his, *Host: Six New Roles of Engagement* and caused me to invite him to the podcast. I'm not sure why the first book didn't, but the second one did Mark. How are you doing?*

**Mark:** *I'm great. Thank you, Joe. It's great to be with you.*

**Joe:** *Well Mark, can you give me that elevator speech about your work and a little background about yourself?*

**Mark:** *My work is about how do we create useful and positive change when things are tough, when things are turbulent when things are difficult to figure with and grasp and understand. When things are going straightforward, change is relatively easy I think, but the real time that people need help is when it's confusing and tough, and nothing seems to make sense anymore, and that's the time you need the stuff that I do. You're right to mention *The Solutions Focus*; that was my first book and a big seller, it's still selling right*

now, which is about how to build useful change by finding positive change and amplifying it. Rather than trying to fix what's wrong, build on what's right. And the latest book, Host, that you just mentioned is thinking about what's the role of the leader in that kind of process. What's the role of the leader when things are confused, and people don't know what to do, and life is complex? This is getting a situation which more and more people are facing more and more at the time I think, and the old leadership models are starting to crack up and not work very well, and I wanted to look at what does it mean to lead when no one knows what's going on. That's the germ of the book, Host.

**Joe:** *What type of leadership book is it?*

**Mark:** Well, it is a leadership book, but we have a very broad definition of leadership. Anyone I think can be a leader. Anyone can act in a way that encourages people to engage with them and move forward. If you're working with customers, you're a leader. If you're working with supplies, you're a leader. If you're working with colleagues, you have the potential to be a leader. We all have, whatever our role in an organization, the chance to act in a leadenly way if you like. I think the metaphor of leading as host, which is what the book is about, offers a really, really neat way to think about how to do that.

**Joe:** *As a host, they take a lot of different roles, right?*

**Mark:** They certainly do, and one of those is to serve people. I think that if you're listening to this podcast and you've heard of servant leadership and in some fields that's quite a big model, I know in Lean it is, in the Agile project and software world, it's a big thing now... Servant leadership is a fantastic idea. It hasn't caught on as much as it might have and I think there are various reasons for that. One of it is we don't really have servants anymore. That metaphor is not one that really resonates with people anymore.

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Anyway, that doesn't sound very cool. "Oh, I'm a servant..." That's kind of I have to put other people first all the time. I think a host is a kind of servant in a way. A host is someone who invites people to gather around and engages people around the topic of common interest.

We all know what it takes to host a party for example. You host a party, and you think about the sort of party you want, you think about who would be neat to have there to have a great party, you invite them... of course, you have to invite them. You can't compel them to come. You have to invite them and reach out. You create a space where the party is going to happen. People arrive, you introduce them to each other, and you make sure that they have what they need, and they have a good time. You connect them up with everybody else. You check the right people are there and maybe occasionally, you might need to throw somebody out of there being completely disrespectful, and then you join in. In six short things, you have what a host does, and that's also a fantastic template for leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Leadership is no longer about having all the answers and telling people what to do because of what I just said – things are confusing, things are complex, things are interrelated, things are changing with time. Rather the role of the leader becomes that of bringing people together and focusing them on the topics that need to be focused on, and serving is one piece of that. There's a whole bunch of other stuff I think that leaders can do as well to make that happen, and that's why I think leading as a host is a new metaphor. It's not the same as leading as a servant, but it's a build and an addition and a new dimension in that whole direction of stuff.

**Joe:** *I'm a sales and marketing guy and a sales guy, so I found it very interesting from a sales perspective. What would be your thoughts of maybe presenting this metaphor to a*

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*sales person?*

**Mark:** My thoughts would be that they would latch on to it very quickly, and they'd only say, "Aha! That's good. That's good." Because I think, many sales people would find that they did some of this already. Because humanity, in general, we have the same ways of operating. We like to be reached out to. We like to be looked after. We like to have an interest taken in us. And that, of course, is what good sales people do, and it's what good hosts do. It's about building relationships and engagement. As a leader, that's the fundamental thing number one is build engagement, because if you don't have engagement, you don't really have anything. If you have people engaged around the mission of your business or the goals of your department or your team, then you've got something to play with. If your people are not engaged, then for all the jumping up and down and standing on your hind legs and mounting off you do, nobody is really interested.

I think if you've got people out there, you're listening to this, and you want to engage people in a better way, then I think you will find a whole bunch of stuff in the Host book which will help you to do that. It's coming in many angles; some of it is quite obvious about asking people what they want for example and finding out what their interests are, but some of the rest of it is not obvious like thinking about how to make invitations really compelling for example, how to think about where you want to talk to people, and how that can make a huge difference. That's one of the things about hosting. The space is very important. How to make sure that you're talking about the right things, and you're not wasting time talking about the wrong things.

There's a whole bunch of stuff in there which I think sales people would find very interesting. As I say, my bet would be that you find that you were doing half of it, but the other half would be new, and that new half would be really, really valuable. Really

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valuable to get a new insight into how we as human beings can engage with other human beings.

I'm fortunate enough to be a good friend of Jack Canfield who has written many successful books about success and sales and so forth. He said new ideas in leadership don't come along very often, but this is a new idea. When you get guys like that saying that this is an important new idea, well I think we have something very exciting here.

**Joe:** *One of the points you make in the book is the terminology of when to step back and when to step forward from a sales perspective. You know, you could be that bowl in the china cabinet, right? You're going in there, pushing and trying to sell that approach of action and looking at a situation and knowing somewhat as a host when you need to step forward, when you need to step back, and I thought that was an excellent metaphor. You spend quite a bit of time in that area in the book.*

**Mark:** Absolutely. Well, it's a really central idea, Joe, in the book. Hosts step forward to make things happen, but then they step back again, and they let other people do things, and other people step forward into the space that they've created. If you think about yourself at a party, you may have had parties where the host is the center of attention all the time, and that gets really boring after awhile. I don't know if you've ever been in that situation. I don't want to have.

A good host will sort of get things going and then they'll sort of disappear. I mean they're not disappearing, but they're going off to sort things out on the side and have a quiet word with people, and see how things are going and let things develop, and then, later on, they'll step up and say, all right everybody, let's go on and do this now, and everybody will go off into the garden or go off to shoot some pool or whatever it is that you're going to

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do.

This idea of not being in people's faces all the time... And now I know as salespeople, we tend to be active, and that's quite right. You want to be proactive, and you want to be meeting people, but there's a time when they just get fed up with it. And actually at that moment then, stepping back and allowing them to get on with things and come forward towards you is really powerful. It's a little bit like dancing. If you dance by moving towards someone all the time, they'll end up with their backs to the wall, wishing that you'd go away. And dancing, of course, isn't like that. You step forward and then you step back again and the other person steps forward, and you develop a mutual rhythm, and a mutual pattern, and a mutual understanding there.

So you're absolutely right, I've met lots of salesmen that I think are very good salesmen, but they step forward too much. I think this idea of thinking about when to step back when to let people come to you rather than you go to them all the time; there's a really powerful idea in here about developing a sense and awareness of that. Some people have it very well to start with, and other people can begin to learn it by reflecting on their experience and how that works for them. But you're right. It's a very central idea that hosts step forward, they make something happen and then step back and allow people to respond to it, and that's where we get the engagement – the to and fro, forward and back.

**Joe:** *You even break that down into 4 different areas. I think. You had like stepping back in the gallery, and in the kitchen, and stepping forward was with the guest or in the spotlight, being the center of attention or something. You use those metaphors very well that what I like about it more than anything is that it was enough of a story that I remembered. Let me put it that way.*

**Mark:** That's great Joe. We've all been hosts. We all know at some level how to host, and we've all been guests, and we know good hosting when we see it, and we know bad hosting when we see it. In a way, what I'm trying to do is take this big idea, this big metaphor or leading as a host or working as a host to engage people and really try and take that apart. What do really good hosts do then that helps them to do that? In the decade between me first of all coming out with this idea of leading as a host and the book coming out, I spent a decade thinking about this and going out to interview people who I thought were great hosts, who seemed to me to have good little league qualities about them and also people whom I thought were great leaders who seemed to have this idea of hosting fairly well down.

The book contains stories from many, many people in the United States, in the UK, in Europe, in South America, and even in Japan or from people whom I've come across who have something to say or something to share about this from their actual practice and actual work. This is not just a big idea if you like. It's a big idea with a whole bunch of very practical, very personable and very doable skills and ideas around it.

**Joe:** *You also defined 6 different roles that you play within those spaces. Why don't you just go ahead and name those 6 for me and give me a brief description of them.*

**Mark:** Okay, sure. Well, I actually already mentioned them in a way because remember when I talked about how you give a party? Let's think back to that. the first thing you do if you want to give a party is you think what kind of party do I want? That's the role of the initiator. The initiator is the one who has an idea and says, something needs to be done about this. I want to engage people around this thing. I have the idea and then think about whom to invite.



The next role is the inviter, and the inviter role is, of course, inviting people and reaching out to them and engaging with them. I write a lot in the book about the idea of soft power, which is how you engage people without forcing them. You give them an exciting picture of how its' going to be and you let them know why you want them to be there. Any good sales person will recognize the power of a good invitation. So this idea of inviting is really important.

Once you've figured out whom you want, then the next thing to think about is where are we going to be? I call that the space creator role and that's a role that you don't find in many leadership books. But the importance of where we're going to meet, whether that's in a place, in an office, in a more relaxed thing, online, but how am I going to make sure that that place is the right place. Is it bringing the right messages? Is it set up for the people? Is it going to support the kind of conversations that I want to have happen. I don't know whether you've ever tried to have a really, really interactive conversation and have people sitting in rows as they were in the theater, but the layout of the room works against you. And so a good host, of course, will make the layout of the room work for them and support the thing that they want to do. So, thinking about the space is important.

Then we have the role of the gatekeeper. In a party situation, the host meets people at the door and welcomes them in and welcomes them over the threshold. That's the gatekeeper. The person standing next to the gate, metaphorically and saying are you the right people, come on in, introducing yourself, finding out about them engaging with them, and occasionally the gatekeeper also then has to throw people out just in case. So they're there to make sure the right people are there, and the wrong people are not there, and the thing is set up well, and guarding the boundaries if you like. So that's the gatekeeper.

Then there's the connector role, and the connector is about introducing people to each

other, introducing people to each other. In parties, we do this naturally. We say, oh you must meet this guy over here; I think you two have something in common, and you connect people like that. Some leaders I met are very good at that, and others are very nervous about it because they want to be the center of attention, and they want everything to go through them. Actually, that's a false worry I think because you can't these days, in the modern world, if everything's through yourself, you just become a traffic jam. You just become a block. What you want to do as a good leader and a good host is get people talking together about stuff that matters to both of them, to all of them. In that way, you start to develop many, many more possibilities that will start to get momentum on their own. Making sure people are well connected in the group is really key.

The final role is the co-participator role which is the idea that the host also joins in. The host is also a member of the group. And so if you're working towards some project, then the host leader will be doing some of the work, as well as leading the thing and playing a part in taking the project forward. And the metaphor goes that when we invite people around for a meal, we eat the same food as they do. If we don't do that, it's really old. And we can think, and the book has lots of examples by what does eating the same food look like when you're talking about leading at work or whatever. And being a part of the team as well as the leader of it and how we can use of that.

Those were the 6 roles. I mean I'll just do them quickly again, to remind everyone: the initiator who is thinking what we want to do, the inviter engaging people, the space creator thinking about where we're going to get together, the gatekeeper welcoming people over the threshold and making sure the right people are there and not the wrong people, or the connector role engaging and introducing people to each other and connecting them, and finally the co-participator of being a member of the team as well as being the leader. And within that, there's such a lot of interesting connections with some existing leadership

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works and new things that are coming around, and in particular this idea of what to do when things are tough when things are puzzling when things are confusing when things are very difficult. Because as I said, in that situation, there's no easy answer. What you have to do is bring people together and together you can work out what to do next.

**Joe:** *With those 6 different roles, you can actually be stepping back or stepping forward in any one of them?*

**Mark:** Absolutely. That's right. It's nice to think that if I'm going to step forward, which role am I stepping forward in? It's about what are you focusing on right now? And so actually it's a big picture idea, and it's also a lot of detailed thoughts; things or ways, specific things and you think, oh that's not quite right, we need to invite somebody else. We have an unbalanced group here, and I need to get somebody else in. Or, oh just a minute, this place that we're going to meet, that's not quite going to be the right thing. How can I adjust the space to support the kind of messages that I want to convey?

I've been fortunate enough to be a consultant for many years now Joe, and I've stuck my nose into lots and lots of many interesting businesses, many of them doing very well and a few of them struggling, and I noticed this thing about space is really interesting. A well-run organization often has a really well-run space. You can tell that people know what they're doing, and you can tell that they know where stuff is, their space is clean, their space is organized. If I walk into an organization that's kind of struggling, so often it's reflected in the space. It's not quite right. Things are broken, things are not in the right place, it's a bit of a mess, and nobody seems to be looking after it.

If I'm going to suggest one new thing for people to think about, is think about the space you work in. Think about the space that you invite people to, to find out about yourself or

to work with them and engage with them, and think about what message does that send in that space. What are they finding out about you from looking at the space you're in? I think it's a really, really helpful tip to look carefully at that space and think, is the best space I could have? Do I need to clean it up? Do I need to sort it out? Do I need to refresh it? Or maybe I need to go to someplace completely different and just see what happens when you start thinking about that.

**Joe:** *And that goes for the virtual world too, doesn't it? I mean the space that you're in is what you're governed by a lot or thought about a lot, I should say and not governed.*

**Mark:** You're absolutely right and creating online space, the work, in some ways it's quite hard. It's even harder than doing it in a room. To make sure that everybody gets voiced, to make sure that everybody feels heard, to make sure that everyone's comfortable with the technology and whatever system you're using. This is real leadership in terms of how do we make sure that everybody in the group can engage? And if they can't, then whatever else we do, we're going to be going uphill. So how you create that environment and atmosphere is just as important as creating it in real physical spaces.

**Joe:** *You said that everybody is a leader at some point in time just about, but for a facilitator, this is an excellent book.*

**Mark:** Yes. If you're facilitating or coaching or doing any of those kinds of roles, being a host is a key part of it, and it's maybe something you can use to expand your repertoire and your ideas in by taking a look at all the really fascinating stories and information that's in the book.

**Joe:** *Just tell me briefly about the Solution Focus Book and was The Host an outgrowth of*

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*it or is it really a separate work in itself?*

**Mark:** I think it's a bit of both Joe. The Solutions Focus, that approach, it's a very positive and pragmatic approach. We found, I discovered in the kind of back of the psychotherapy closet in the early 90's, and there's a single solution-focused brief therapy which is those same ideas in therapy, and I thought, wow, this is really cool stuff. This is very crunchy, and pragmatic, and positive. If managers and organization people can get their hands on this technology, these ideas, they could do some real neat stuff with them.

So for more than 20 years ago now, I started being a management consultant and I started learning to be a solutions-focused therapist. Then I wrote the book the Solutions Focus with Paul Z. Jackson, which was the first business book about that approach. And since then there're all sorts of other books that came along, and then we have international groups that have conferences to share their ideas and people run training course, and I run an online course with The university of Wisconsin that attracts people from all over the world. It's a really, really nice framework if you're working in a kind of coaching, consulting, facilitating, helping capacity.

**Joe:** *What is upcoming for you Mark? What's on the horizon for you?*

**Mark:** Well, what's on the horizon is expanding this idea of host leadership because I think that whereas the solution focused ideas are really good if you're a coach or a helper, what does it mean if you're really a leader? I think The Host book for me is about what solution focused work looks like when you're a leader, as opposed to a helper, although lots of helpers could find useful in there. What's happening for us, the book came out last year. We're going around speaking about that. We're having our very first Host leadership gathering here in London, England on the 16<sup>th</sup> of September. That's the very first

international meeting of people interested in this whole approach of leading as a host and working as a host. We're going to have some amazing speakers. We've got some of the fantastic people I met while I was going around writing the book. My co-author Helen Bailey will be there as well, and we're going to have people coming from the States, we have people coming from Europe, we have people from the UK all coming together in London for their very, very first gathering like that and I'm really looking forward to seeing what we can do there to learn together, to take it forward, to take another step.

After that, we're thinking about putting on a series of online programs to help people who can't make it to London. Maybe 8-week programs or something like that which will be about engaging with us and thinking about whatever work people are doing, whether that's leading a team, or being a sales person, or leading a sales team, or acting as a solo enterprise. Think about yourself as a host and we're going to take people through some processes and engagement. So they'll really explore that, what it means to me in my situation and to you in your situation, on an online basis because we realized that not everybody can come to London and though what a fantastic place it is, obviously. And so I'm very keen to reach out. I've been running the successful solution focused Coaching course online for some years now, and I'm very keen to expand that into host leadership courses online.

If people want to find out more about that, you're right to mention my original website at Sfwork.com, but the place to go for host leadership stuff is hostleadership.com. It's quite straightforward – hostleadership.com, and you'll find out about the gathering there, and there're loads of blogs, there're lots of videos, there's stuff that we've written to go in various places in magazines and journals about host leadership. There're lots and lots of resources there. You'll also find access there to our LinkedIn group and if you're a LinkedIn person, and you want to engage in these kind of topics, then join the LinkedIn group. It's a

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great way to engage with us there too.

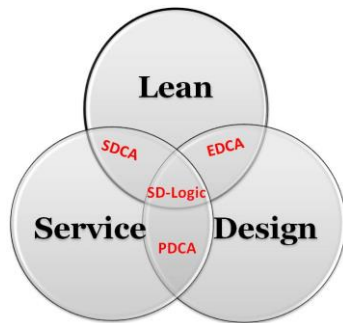
**Joe:** *Is there the best way to contact you, through the Website? What is the best way?*

**Mark:** Well, the Website is a great way. People can join the LinkedIn group as I said as well, or they can just email me. Email me at [mark@swork.com](mailto:mark@swork.com). That stands for solution focused work dot com. Or through the Website; and I love hearing from people. I'm very, very open to being contacted, and there's lots of information and resources on the Website, so do check that out. And if you want to ask me a question, just get in touch anytime.

**Joe:** *I can tell people how easy it is because you answered me... I would like to thank you very much, Mark. I appreciate it. I appreciate your time here, and I compliment your both books, and I will tell people that they're very easy reads, they're written well, but they're not books that you're going to read one time. There's a lot you can pull out of them and when I say an 'easy read,' I don't mean that by anything except being a compliment.*

**Mark:** Thank you very much, Indeed Joe. I appreciate that. and I hope that they're very readable, and we worked very hard to pack a lot of information and a lot of ideas into a small space in both of those books, and I'm pretty pleased with how they've come out. So folks, get a hold of a copy. They're both on Kindle as well, if you like reading that kind of way and see what you think, share them with your friends and I look forward to seeing you and hearing from you, hearing about your work as a host as you go forward with that.

**Joe:** *Well, I'd like to thank you again very much. This podcast would be available on the Business901 iTunes store and the Business901 Website. Thanks again everyone for listening.*



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Joe Dager is President of Business901, a firm specializing in bringing the continuous improvement process to the sales and marketing arena. He takes his process thinking of over thirty years in marketing within a wide variety of industries and applies it through Lean Marketing and Lean Service Design.

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