

HUMAN POTENTIAL AT WORK

Host - Debra Ruh



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Guest: Doug Foresta **Guest Title:** Producer / Host / Speaker

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Doug: Hello, and welcome. If you're listening to this as a Creating Change listener, this is Doug Foresta. We have a really, really cool episode. I'm so excited. With me is Debra Ruh, or should I say that maybe I am with Debra.

Debra, do you want to introduce yourself to your listeners?

Debra: Yes. Thank you so much, Doug. So if you are listening to the podcast from Human Potential at Work, I'm excited again to have Doug Foresta, my podcast and mentor on this episode. As you can see, we're doing two podcasts as one, and we're very excited.

So back to you, Doug.

Doug: Thank you. Today, we're going to be talking about -- I don't like to say we're going to be talking about disability, although we are, but we're going to be talking about human potential, really. But one of the things I know, Debra, that we were discussing is a lot of times when people think about people with disabilities, they think of other people. Right? There's other people out there that are affected. And I'm wondering if you can say a bit about what do you think -- one of the things we were talking about is that in fact it's not just other people out there, but that do you think it's more people than maybe we realize that are affected by disabilities?

Debra: Yes. Doug, I've been in the "disability" field for 29 years. The reason why I say that is because I have the blessing of being a mother of two grown children, and as a lot of my listeners know, my oldest daughter, Sara, was born with Down Syndrome. And so, I remember at the time, when the doctors told my husband and I that she had Down Syndrome, thinking, "Well, I don't know anybody with a disability." Well, I actually knew quite a few people with disabilities, but I guess in my mind, I had designated disabilities very narrowly.

And so, as I've grown in my field, and my daughter's been a great, great teacher, a great teacher to me, I've been on a spiritual path my entire life. I remember when I was a little girl, when I would get really, really scared, I would think, well, you

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know, what could be worse than what's happening right now? And I'd think, oh, dying, and then it's just blackness. And I would scare the heck out of myself as a little girl, and then I started thinking, well, what if it doesn't happen that way?

So I've been on this spiritual path, but my daughter, she's not on a spiritual path; she just is. She's in the moment. She sees value in all people. She's got this beautiful spirit, Doug. So to me, all of this ties together. Don't you agree?

Doug: Definitely. I really feel torn about -- we've had this conversation, I know that's why your podcast is called Human Potential at Work -- I feel so torn about the word disability and even the concept of disability. And I know that there's other words people use, and differently abled and all that, but I think on the one hand, yes, we have to acknowledge that, for example, I spoke about this before, Debra, I'm so blind without my glasses. As this is recording today, it's actually my birthday, and I waited until the last minute, I had to get my license renewed yesterday, and the guy said, "Do you use your glasses to drive?" and I said, "Only when I want to live."

So am I disabled? I don't think of myself that way. I don't have that concept. But why am I not considered disabled, or am I? Or what does that even mean?

Debra: Right, and I think a very important thing to note here is unfortunately, having a disability is seen as a bad thing. Even my daughter, once again with Down Syndrome, I speak all over the world about empowering people in the workforce and society, specifically people with disabilities. Sometimes I'll talk about her having Down Syndrome, and she has said many times, "I don't know why you keep saying I have Down Syndrome. I don't have Down Syndrome." And when she says that, it makes me so sad, because I think she's a beautiful person, partially because she has Down Syndrome, but at the same time, as an independent individual. For me, she has the right to be questioning what does that label mean to who I am, and are you discounting me by labeling me, society and maybe mom.

So part of the problem we have is determining that people different from us or less than us, people with disabilities are less, so the worst thing I could think of ever happening is being blind or having Down Syndrome, or take your pick and insert whatever you want in there. It's because we don't understand human potential, as we've talked about.

When you define disabilities, it's defined different ways in different countries, different cultures and different religions. And so I think what's important about the work that you and I are doing together and separately is we are human beings. We all have something to add to the conversation. We all add value. We all have abilities and we all have disabilities, and I've got quite a few disabilities. But we all add value.

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Yesterday on Twitter, I saw an ugly Tweet that a provocative person put out there, and he had said that Hillary Clinton, whenever she'd accepted the presidential nominee as the Democratic candidate, which was a very important moment for women regardless of which side of the fence you're on, if you're in the U.S., but she with joy was looking up at the balloons falling and she was very joyful, and he said that she looked like she had Down Syndrome or a lobotomy.

I thought that was such a mean thing to say.

Doug: That's awful.

Debra: Because what she was doing, she was having a joyful moment. She is finally the candidate. This woman has worked really hard, no matter what you think of her. You've got to applaud that she's worked really hard to earn that moment. And is there stuff swirling around, noise? Absolutely, but I responded to this gentleman and said, "My daughter, born with Down Syndrome, adds great value as a human being to society." Of course he didn't respond, but this is the worst insult this man can think to say to Hillary, is that either she has a mental health illness or she has Down Syndrome.

That's the old way. To me, that's the old hateful, fearful energy, and the conversations we're having and that we're having with our guests, is the empowering, beautiful, wow, I know that maybe I only have one leg, for example, or maybe I have autism or whatever, but I still can add value to society. And of course as we age, more of us acquire disabilities, that by the way, if we look at them in the right light, we actually can grow into stronger contributing individuals because of that.

Right, Doug?

Doug: Oh, definitely. There's a beautiful book by Linda Sanford, called Strong at The Broken Places, and she talks about -- it's a quote from Hemingway, I think, he says, "Life breaks us all, and some of us become strong in the broken places." I would go even further, to say that we're not broken.

And I will say something about Hillary Clinton. So first, let me say that that's horrible, obviously, for someone to say she looked like she had Down Syndrome or a lobotomy. So many levels of why that's horrible. But there is something about Hillary Clinton that I think most people would agree with, regardless of your politics, which is that Hillary Clinton has a problem with being her authentic self.

Debra: Yes, I agree.

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Doug: You clearly get an energy when you listen to Hillary and when you see Hillary, that there's something that she's holding back. You get a sense that there's something there of who do you want me to be today, and here's the candidate that I've created for you. I think that that hurts her, because we get that sense that she's not fully being her authentic self in the world, and we could argue why that is, probably because lots of reasons, right? There are people that are trying to destroy here. I'm not entirely blaming her, but there is that energy.

Debra: You can feel it. You can feel it, and as I watched what happened with her with Obama during that bid for president, and even with Bernie, watching what happened with Bernie, it was like, okay, is this who you want me to be? Is this right? Is this right?

Doug: Yeah.

Debra: I think I predict that what's going to happen, and I hope she wins the presidency only because what Trump is saying --

Doug: It's pretty horrible.

Debra: -- it's fearful and very scary, it really is, and making fun of the journalist with a disability, I just -- there's just so many things. But I think Hillary has the opportunity, if she does with the President of the United States, to show us who she is. The one thing I really respect is that she has been doing service her whole life. When they were showing all that she had done in the way of service and giving back to mankind, that is a very important leadership skill, to me.

So I think that we have the opportunity to see who is she really, and maybe she's this brilliant, amazing, loving, authentic woman, but I think she's afraid to show us who she is. So I agree with your assessment.

Doug: Yeah, and what I'm thinking as we're having this discussion, is that I think what's really interesting to me is the idea of, what if we could embrace our imperfections? It's important that we have disability laws and it's important that we have all these things in place to protect people with disabilities, but on a deeper level, what if we were able to embrace our imperfections?

I'll share this with you, Debra. I don't think I've ever shared this with listeners. When I was in my early 20s, I decided for some reason to take an IQ test, and it was definitely coming from places of fear, of not being smart enough or something like that. It was really interesting. So I took this test and the psychologist said, "Well, I have good news and bad news." I said, "All right, what is it?" She said, "Well, the good news is, your total IQ came out in the 99.999 percentile, so your overall IQ is in the top, like, .1 percent of the population.

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Debra: Wow.

Doug: I was like, okay, what's the bad news? And she goes, "Well, you have this one area of deficit in spatial acuity that is really significant and much greater than the average population." She goes, "You actually test out at the fifth grade level in spatial acuity." And I said, "What does that mean?" And she said, "I wouldn't want to drive over any bridge that you design." My whole family is engineers. Everyone else in my family is an engineer. All I could focus on, Debra, I couldn't hear that you're in the 99th percentile. All I could hear is you have the intelligence of a fifth grader.

I got so stuck in that for a long time, my point being what if we could embrace and love ourselves deeply, for our imperfections, and embrace and love others and focus on what's right with us instead of what's "wrong" with us.

Debra: I agree, and I think even more so, even understanding what we today perceive as wrong with a person, understanding that that might be their greatest gift to society. I've used examples before on my podcast, of an accountant that was deaf that worked for Ernst & Young, and as they were accommodating this very, very smart accountant so that the team could more effectively work together, the tools and the different accommodations that they brought in to support this man wound up allowing the entire team to be more productive.

And so, everyone benefited from maybe what was seen as some as a flaw, when actually it wound up being his super strength. I don't know this individual, but obviously he's a very smart man that is contributing to a really important field.

And so, what if we could stop, and I know this is what both of us are trying to do, to challenge the beliefs that you are somehow broken, Doug, because maybe you can't build bridges, which by the way, I can't either. And being authentic enough to show our weaknesses to people. And often, we try to hide them. Sometimes, if you're a person with a visible disability -- many, many disabilities are invisible, and that's why I think it's always interesting when someone like myself said, "Well, I don't know anybody with a disability," when I realized that I had a daughter with Down Syndrome. Well, in actuality, I knew a lot of people with disabilities. I had an uncle, a great uncle that had gotten very sick as a baby and it really damaged his brain, and so he had a lot of problems. I had a grandmother who had Epilepsy, and actually had a seizure and fell into the fire and -- anyway, since then, both of my parents acquired disabilities, and my father has passed now and he's missed, but my mother has had a very significant mental health illness her whole life that she's tried to really manage the best she can. She has been a great teacher, negatively and positive, for me, and I have great love for my mother.

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And so, what if we looked at these things and said, these are also our abilities. Our disabilities are our abilities. Because as somebody like you, Doug, that can't see without your glasses, you've had to become a really good problem solver. And of course putting on glasses helps, but every once in a while you get in a situation where maybe you don't have those glasses right away or you're in a situation. So you become a natural born problem solver, because you have to overcome that.

Doug: Well, it also gave me better hearing.

Debra: Right, right.

Doug: So definitely, I agree. So one thing is that what we think of as our weaknesses can actually be strengths. We don't really know. The other thing is that I feel like the other piece that we don't get sometimes is that I think we are not meant as human beings, no one can really do it alone. You know, even Donald Trump, Mr. Do it Yourself, he has a huge team. I'll throw in some Hebrew into this episode, but there's a blessing in Hebrew that says, "Thank you for creating many souls and their deficiencies." And so the question becomes, why would you be thanking God for deficiencies?

And so the answer is, because then we'll need each other. The baker needs the tailor. The tailor needs the baker. We all have strengths and we all have things that we are "deficient" in, but the idea is that if we can see it as like pieces of a puzzle. Instead of, oh there's something missing in me, it actually forces us as human beings to find each other because we need each other.

Debra: Right, right, and we all add value. It's just so beautiful. So many people that I have on my program, they have taken their "disability" and turned it into a major strength that is actually contributing great value to the world. I want to say something else. That was a beautiful, beautiful blessing. But one thing I have seen, I was raised as a Christian, I come in Florida, I'm in Virginia now, so I come from the South and I was raised in the Baptist part of the Christian faith, and so I didn't really know that many people that were Jewish, even though my mother says we have some lineage in our family, but I do want to say that one thing that I've seen in the community of persons with disabilities, the Jewish community is doing more to support and include people with disabilities than almost any other religious segment. From what I've seen, as a global expert in this space, I see them doing more than the Christians or the Muslims or the Buddhist, breaking it just into sects. I have been so amazed by the goodness that I've seen from the Jewish community, and I remember telling you that, Doug, and asking you why, and you explained how important community is to the Jewish faith. And of course it's important to all of the other faiths as well, but I just have to do a shout out to the Jewish people that are doing so much work in this space.

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Doug: Yeah, and I would say there's good work being done all over the world, but yeah, you had actually -- one of the things I'll share with you and listeners, and I think I've talked to you before about this, Debra, but the Jewish concept of Tikkun Olam, which means repairing the world. And in the Kabbalah, in the Jewish mysticism, the belief was that the world was this unformed void with nothing in it, and then God breathed air into the world, but the vessel of the world couldn't contain it and it shattered. It was fully perfect, and all the pieces shattered into billions and billions and trillions of pieces. And Tikkun Olam is about the idea that we pick up all the pieces and we repair the world, and then we restore the world to its original perfection.

The saying is that the work is not yours to finish, but nor are you free to abandon it. I think in that tradition, every one of us, that's why it's important, to me at least and I'm sure you'll probably agree with this, Debra, that's why it's important that we not just give disability payments to people with disabilities. We all can pick up the pieces. We all have something to contribute to -- not only that we do, but I think we have a responsibility to. That we're not just here, no one is here to just pick up a disability check. We're all here to do a job, and whatever that job is, big or small, we're all here to do that.

Debra: I agree, I agree. I've worked with a lot of countries, helping them to come up with plans to more meaningfully include people with disabilities, and I always say, don't just write a check. Spend money that empowers people with disabilities to take care of themselves. Now, you take someone like my daughter. Does she need more help than somebody that might have cerebral palsy or than other people classified as disabled? Absolutely, because she has an intellectual, a cognitive disability, but she still has abilities that add great value to the workforce. She's worked for Nordstrom's and gets glowing reviews. She's worked for them for over 10 years, and they love her, and so do the customers.

So I think deciding that people are not valuable because, once again, a label, I think is a mistake, and I think all of the money we spend should be leading to an outcome of people being able to contribute their gifts, and that we all can learn from really having to work harder to overcome our deficiencies, because that is part of life. That's what gives us the *** (22:20) that are so delicious and sometimes frightening at the same time.

Doug: Well, speaking of sharing our gifts, people might be wondering, well, why is Doug on here or Debra's here? We obviously do stuff together all the time, but I just want to say that you're going to be joining the Empower Radio family, and so I'm really excited about that. Do you want to say something about that?

Debra: Absolutely. You introduced me to the CEO, Brent, of Empower Radio, and I am so impressed with the gifts that that man has and what he's bringing to the world, and I am so honored to become part of Empower Radio. The thing I love about

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Empower Radio and what Brent is building -- and I believe his name is Brent Carey, correct, Doug?

Doug: Correct.

Debra: Yeah, and he saw so much negative, everything was negative in the media, and he wanted to start showing the good stories and the empowering stories and the hopeful stories. And so, I am so excited about joining Empower Radio, and I thank you, Doug, for introducing me to Brent. But I think together, we're going to be able to raise all of the vibrations for everyone, and continue to make sure that people understand the only disability is not being able to see human potential.

Doug: Well, thank you, Debra, and I'm really excited about you joining the network. I really do think that -- I'll wrap up with this. At the end of the book, I'm not sure it's Do What You Love and The Money Will Follow, but it's one of Marsha Sinetar's books, she's the author of that book, and she talks about this story the C E O of 3M told, about a little girl who is in a classroom and they said, draw a picture of someone creative. This girl starts drawing and the teacher says, "What are you drawing?" and she goes, "Oh, I'm drawing a picture of God. He's creative because he created everything in the world." The teacher is horrified. She goes, "You can't draw a picture of God." She goes, "Nobody knows what God looks like." And she said, "Well, you'll know when I finish my assignment."

What Marsha says is that our work is our life's assignment, and that when we finish that work capably and creatively and artfully, that that is a manifestation of the divine in the world.

And so, I think the work that you're doing is so important, Debra. I'm so grateful to be on this journey with you, and like I said, really grateful that you'll be joining the network, too.

Debra: Yeah, I'm just -- it feels like a dream come true. I'm so excited about being part of Empower Radio. I'm so excited.

Doug: Well, thank you, everyone, and as always as well, I'll leave listeners with my call, which is keep creating, the world needs your gifts, and that is for all of us. All right, take care, everyone, this is Doug Foresta.

Debra: Thank you, Doug.

Doug: Thank you.