

00;00;06;24 - 00;00;13;24

Valerie Jackman

Welcome to the CDN Women in Leadership podcast. My name is Valerie Jackman Leadership lead at CDN.

00;00;14;24 - 00;00;20;07

Joanna Campbell

And my name is Joanna Campbell, Principal and Chief Exec of Dumfries and Galloway College.

00;00;21;10 - 00;00;37;08

Valerie Jackman

This podcast is designed for women who are working in education and Aspire to progress their career to the next level. The podcast focuses on what women can do and how they can leverage their strengths to advance and thrive in their career.

00;00;38;13 - 00;00;51;29

Joanna Campbell

Today, we will be exploring the topic of the desire to please and perfectionism, and I'm delighted to welcome our guest, Joan Mackay from Education Scotland. Welcome, John. It's a pleasure to have you with us today.

00;00;53;00 - 00;00;55;08

Joan MacKay

Good morning, Valerie, and good morning, Joanna.

00;00;56;05 - 00;01;03;06

Joanna Campbell

Morning, John. Could you perhaps start by telling us about your own leadership journey to where you are now, please?

00;01;04;19 - 00;01;30;28

Joan MacKay

Yes. So that's always an interesting question because we it is your leadership again. And I think my leadership began as a child, which sounds a very a very strange thing to see with confidence. But I had a great degree of freedom in the village in which I grew up. I was brought up in an island in in what were pretty ideal circumstances, aim for a child.

00;01;31;09 - 00;01;49;02

Joan MacKay

And then I had leadership roles and in the community, and then through my school and into secondary school. And it's only when year, of course, much further down the line that you look back on all of that and you see that has helped to shape why you think the way you do and and why you do the things you do.

00;01;49;20 - 00;02;10;24

Joan MacKay

And then I had all sorts of, you know, plans about what I might want to do an interest in. And they were tied in I know recognised to issues such as social justice. And so at one point heavily influenced by Atticus Finch, of course, when I read the book about his work. And so I did look at Lowe at one point.

00;02;10;24 - 00;02;34;26

Joan MacKay

But anyway, here we are. And I went down the route that everybody said I should do, which was become a teacher, Gillian And I said, No, I won't become a teacher because you've told me to. But I did and I loved it and I still love it. And I've been David Hayden, the head teacher, and my various secondments to government and other places where the learning was fabulous at national level and international level.

00;02;35;13 - 00;03;11;07

Joan MacKay

And I joined Jemmy, Her Majesty's Inspectorate and am learnt a lot in that job. And from that perspective, including at that point getting an insight into a huge range of Scottish education across the system and which was, which was fabulous. And, and I am now heading up a curriculum innovation in education Scotland and, and that is wonderful and exciting and challenging in equal measure.

00;03;11;08 - 00;03;26;19

Valerie Jackman

What a lovely journey. Thanks for sharing that too. So the topic, as we mentioned that we're going to be talking about is the desire to please and perfectionism. And why do you think this is kind of relevant in particular to women in leadership?

00;03;28;10 - 00;04;07;08

Joan MacKay

Well, that's such an interesting topic, and give me time, I suppose, to surface some of my own thoughts, which went into the for a because partly because I don't think I feel particularly affected by either of these elements, you know, the desire to please or perfectionism. But it was really good to think about it and to think how it might impact on people I work with and what I see people who are sometimes, to my mind, highly capable and a could and should be doing the actions or the things that they talk about, but for some reason or other that it doesn't come into fruition.

00;04;07;22 - 00;04;39;22

Joan MacKay

And so I think the two separate things desire to please and perfectionism and the each one can be evident in the behaviours and characteristics of individuals. I think when they're both present in the one individual and that individual as a leader, I think we're in serious trouble. And is it relevant to woman in particular? And I think it's interesting, I didn't do enough background research on this, but I suppose I was struck on in the little I did do by how it could be quite gender specific.

00;04;39;22 - 00;04;59;26

Joan MacKay

In other words, it can be more of a factor for women than it can be for men. And that does give me a lot of pause for thought, which which I'll carry on deeply on beyond this podcast, because I guess, you know, the questions we're going to discuss will take us into, well, how do we recognise it and what do we do about it when we see it?

00;05;00;10 - 00;05;28;04

Joan MacKay

And so I think also it's important to, you know, in the little research I did in perfectionism is now seen as almost a medical condition and some of the research shows and just to give a quote from from a research head in child development and perfection in ISM, she quotes something quite dramatic. We are heading towards an epidemic and a public health issue, which really made me sit up.

00;05;28;16 - 00;05;54;18

Joan MacKay

AM And then I kind of reflected on the behaviour of, you know, all the teenagers I knew were nearly twenties, and sometimes that obsession with how they look and how they push themselves on social media and began to question some of that. And so I think it's really important that women recognise that either in themselves or in the people they work with.

00;05;54;18 - 00;06;20;07

Joan MacKay

If it's if it, if it displays and I think also probably, you know, I found it quite interesting that I am I have a son and a daughter and I asked each of them about this topic and it was interesting that my late teenage daughter replied immediately that as a woman she would be judged for making a mistake.

00;06;20;08 - 00;06;29;18

Joan MacKay

She didn't get something perfect, whereas where she imagined she wouldn't. So that would be something pretty profound. And I think about the issue.

00;06;31;12 - 00;06;57;20

Valerie Jackman

Yeah. And so I've done some work with some and some women in education and some female leaders, you know, people in principal role or deputy principal role excuse me. And one of the things that somebody said to me that quite often for women when they work in education, they're good. They need to be good, they need to please and they kind of carry that with them.

00;06;57;20 - 00;07;17;04

Valerie Jackman

So it could be like a culture thing, you know, if you're the good girl and you please and and then you go on and you study and you go back into schools and you're still looking to please. So I don't know whether there's anything in that or not. And but I did find it interesting that it was somebody in education who, you know, a woman in education because shared that.

00;07;18;09 - 00;07;26;27

Valerie Jackman

I thought what you were saying there about your daughter and how she was seen, she she's judged if she makes a mistake. Is that as if she.

00;07;27;28 - 00;07;45;00

Joan MacKay

Well, I have I didn't I let her see what she wanted to see. But I think it did cause me to go back and just examine that. And I think in the context of what you've just said, the it. Valerie, I think it is certainly the last research I saw, which is which is dated some time about child development.

00;07;45;09 - 00;08;05;02

Joan MacKay

It is a fact that girls tend to please in the classroom. They will conform far more to the studio types of sitting down when they're told to sit down, putting their hands up, when they're told getting the right answer. Whereas boys will push the boundaries of that or that's the perception and and listen to the language I've just used to push the boundaries of it.

00;08;05;02 - 00;08;25;10

Joan MacKay

My own analysis would be that the boundaries shouldn't be there or a lot of them shouldn't be there. But and that's part of the issue. So and I think you then see that behaviour often playing out and, and you know, since we're talking about education, I have seen that very, very clearly where it is a still a very hierarchical structure.

00;08;25;10 - 00;08;46;01

Joan MacKay

And so by that I mean in this broadest sense, to give you an idea. AM Often when I'm working, see with an audience of David heads and head teachers, let's see across the hall of secondary and we do a lot of warm up exercises so they understand, you know, what perceptions they're taking to the room. And, you know, one of my favourites to do is to see your key.

00;08;46;01 - 00;09;11;17

Joan MacKay

We're about to think about other pathways for young people to follow, which are the traditional ones. And I say to them, How many if you put your hand up, if you had a reasonably good boy or girl in school and you'll almost certainly get every hand in the room going up and then I'll see how many of you moved from a secondary school into a big school, I call it, whether it's college or university, big school.

00;09;11;17 - 00;09;35;01

Joan MacKay

And again, all the hands will go up and how many of you, relatively speaking, where a good boy to a girl in a in in big school. Yes. An all hands will go up again. And with one or two, you know, and put it I mean, be good and so on. And then and I see. And how many of you went back to school And when we pause and we see therein lies the problem.

00;09;36;12 - 00;10;17;29

Joan MacKay

If we don't examine that both as men and women and what that means and what that does and how that builds over assumptions and our perceptions and how we then take all of that to judge the world that we're designing and responsible for. And leading. Then we have a kind of a problem. And if you then build into that, am part of that good behaviour that both a man and a woman and possibly the woman more so displayed, then I think you're going to see that desire to please am been a very, very strong factor and it carries on in my own evidence of, you know, for instance, interviewing a head teachers is that you

00;10;17;29 - 00;10;39;20

Joan MacKay

still have that sense of looking for the right answer. So, you know, if I use an HMO, for instance, in that role and perceived, rightly or wrongly, to be in a position of power, if I don't handle my questioning in that situation really well. AM What I'm allowing to happen is the person I'm asking the question. Often this person might be leading a school.

00;10;39;20 - 00;10;53;28

Joan MacKay

I might be leading an enormous school, doing fantastic things. If there is a desire to please, they are looking to give the answer. They think I am looking for. And I think that's problematic. Really problematic to progress.

00;10;54;10 - 00;11;09;10

Valerie Jackman

Yeah. So. Well, thank you, John. Joanna, from your own experience, you know, the desire to please and do you you're a leader yourself and you also have a number of female leaders, aspiring leaders in your organisation. What's your sense of that?

00;11;11;05 - 00;11;44;11

Joanna Campbell

I think, you know, it goes back to the traits that women have, you know, that make them inherently different to their male counterparts. So, you know, the ability to nurture, the ability to be intuitive to other feelings. And I'm not saying that men don't have those traits, but I think, you know, we're mothers were carers, were sisters, you know, and a lot of that those traits come with those roles that we play with in our lives.

00;11;44;24 - 00;12;21;17

Joanna Campbell

And I think for people, fear of other people's opinion is a really serious issue with women. And that drives us to, to try and please. But from my own experience, I think that, you know, your younger self tries to control what other people's opinion of you might be through your actions, through your desire to please, but actually age and the experience that you develop as you go through life really helps you to become more wise to what you need to do as opposed to what you think you should be doing.

00;12;22;04 - 00;13;06;22

Joanna Campbell

And as a leader, and I think you're kind of desensitised to, you know, always trying to please everybody because you're never going to please everybody. So when I say desensitised, what I mean there as you develop the confidence to take difficult decisions and decisions which won't please everybody. But and that's an important point. Once they are fair and ones that people will respect you for making those decisions, whether they don't necessarily agree with them, they will at least understand that you're coming at this from a position of fairness, equity and doing the right thing ultimately, so that, you know, that's.

00;13;06;22 - 00;13;07;29

Joanna Campbell

Kate, my take on it.

00;13;09;03 - 00;13;41;05

Valerie Jackman

And I think there's something about developing the culture as well, where women are encouraged to and not fit into that pleasing role and, you know, and giving women the space and the voice, you know, a bit like Nancy Klein's work, where everybody gets the opportunity to contribute. And and one of the things that occurs to me as well, I think one of the consequences of women in particular having a desire to please are to get things right.

00;13;41;23 - 00;14;14;21

Valerie Jackman

And I think one of the consequences of that is imposter syndrome. So I deliver a significant number of leadership programmes and the amount of women who talk about imposter syndrome. They feel as if they shouldn't really be there. They haven't really got permission to be there yet or to be fulfilling the role, you know, and I would always say own it if you've got that rule and if it is your role, then you know, really own it and embrace it and make the most of it.

00;14;14;21 - 00;14;23;11

Valerie Jackman

But there's often a kind of a look for other people, for validation from other people and more senior people.

00;14;23;11 - 00;14;56;03

Joan MacKay

Yeah, it's really interesting that there's a great quote from a Chinese philosopher Lao to, you know, I think what you said, John Pym reminded me of this, which is, you know, care about what others think and you will always be their prisoner. And that's, you know, a pretty, pretty profound. And if that desire to please is about that, then as you see, there needs to be a recognition at some point that you need to break out of that to fulfil whatever your leadership is called to be.

00;14;56;16 - 00;15;22;19

Joan MacKay

And so I think I think for me I think this is this is a funny question. Me personally, am I, you know, just just to make it, to make you smile. When I said to my team who I work with, you know, obviously all the A.D.D. I'm going to do this podcast, and they said, you know, what's the topic?

00;15;22;19 - 00;16;06;03

Joan MacKay

I read out the desire to please and perfection and the response was uproarious and egregious. LAUGHTER. And so for myself, I have to see. I think the desire to please isn't particularly strong. And and I really went back over that over my over my kind of leadership journey and thought where did that come from? And am And partly, again, if I go back to my childhood, I said I grew up in a small community and often there were things that you were expected to do and every tell you my phone myself, challenging them and maybe not verbally, but challenging Y And sometimes they agreed that they were the right thing to do.

00;16;06;03 - 00;16;29;25

Joan MacKay

But other times I thought they're only happening because everybody wants to keep in harmony here, but they're not actually doing the right thing. The right thing is too difficult for them, or the right thing upsets the status quo and therefore the right thing will not get done because we have always done things in this way. So I think very early on I began to question this whole desire to please thing.

00;16;29;25 - 00;16;53;00

Joan MacKay

And then, of course, as a woman and again, that whole thing about, you know, you get you get an idea of what the perfect woman looks like and what the perfect woman should be able to do. And you have to, again, have some thoughts about is that is that important to you and does it become part of who you are?

00;16;53;10 - 00;17;19;07

Joan MacKay

And for me, it didn't. But if I could come back to that later. But I think if you if you begin to see that it's really important that we recognise that in the people we work with and especially, you know, in our leadership roles, that is no point in just focusing on ourselves. And you know, we have 40 or selves and attending to it in ourselves.

00;17;19;18 - 00;17;37;14

Joan MacKay

We need to be very aware that it is highly likely that it's an issue for at least one of the people or two of the people or many of the people we are working with. And it's been clear to that. And we are that then gets in the week and off of what I call the good work and the work that needs to be done.

00;17;38;00 - 00;17;42;01

Joan MacKay

And and and I think that's one of the things that we need to think about.

00;17;43;08 - 00;18;06;03

Valerie Jackman

Yeah, and that was going to be my next question. So, you know, if we're aware whether it's relevant for us or for other people, if we are aware that there may be a desire to please and to get things

right, how do we start to then support those people so that they can actually bring the real thoughts and ideas that they've got?

00;18;06;03 - 00;18;16;00

Valerie Jackman

And, you know, what you're saying is first, first of all, just have an awareness of it. But is there anything else that either of you think that we can do?

00;18;16;00 - 00;18;43;15

Joanna Campbell

I think is probably building an environment where women can develop that confidence to to step up to the role that that and I mean, I always say to my senior team, you've aimed to see at the table you have a right to be there. And you've done that by demonstrating that you have the skills and abilities to operate at that level, not place to men and women.

00;18;44;02 - 00;19;06;24

Joanna Campbell

And so it's about building the confidence through whether it be, you know, a project activity within college or across the sector or with industry or whoever. That's, you know, one of the one of the ways in which I think we can help move that forward here.

00;19;07;08 - 00;19;39;14

Valerie Jackman

And for me, I see much more talk and action about diversity and the importance of diversity and diversity of thought at it in leadership teams and in and in teams in general. And I think there's a kind of a nudge towards creating more of a culture where we where we do embrace diversity. And John, you were talking about the hierarchical kind of power structures where we're where we're moving from those and we're creating the spaces for people to bring their best selves to work.

00;19;40;17 - 00;19;52;13

Joanna Campbell

So, Jordan, we talk we talked about the desire to please and how that relevant to women in leadership. What do you think are the consequences of this being part of your leadership brand?

00;19;53;16 - 00;20;19;03

Joan MacKay

I think the consequence in a nutshell is that it limits your leadership. You are restricted in what you can do. A lot of your energy goes into the pleasing, the achieving of perfectionism, and you don't get where you want to be. And if I can give you two illustrations which came to me again from my own leadership journey and from my personal life, I once went to visit a friend who was in school with me, who became a teacher too.

00;20;19;09 - 00;20;45;23

Joan MacKay

She went to different university. She had asked me to come and see it and we sat together and she said, I want to share this with you. And she took from her kitchen table the most exquisite, beautiful pieces of tea, which she had spent hours and hours and days on and said, Do you think they're good enough? And what I was looking at was the most beautifully presented learning plans, what she was going to do in the next week, in the next months.

00;20;46;02 - 00;21;11;26

Joan MacKay

And she'd been asked to submit by her head teacher. And I remember just a strong sense of incredible sadness, because what I also knew was that she was struggling in the classroom. She couldn't build relationships with her youngsters, and yet all of her time was taken up with preparing these these beautiful, beautiful plants in every kind of colour.

00;21;12;04 - 00;21;30;23

Joan MacKay

That is what she'd been taught to do. That is what she had been taught. It mattered. So that was that reflection. And then I say that against my my mother. M my mother is now gone. But one of the phrases she used as we were growing up and she had four children and, you know, a big a big house and to run and a grandmother in the house.

00;21;30;29 - 00;21;49;26

Joan MacKay

And every so often she would see this phrase which at the time irritated me, and it was in garlic jan hus jeune rouge. And it was it will do. And I used to see in my young head or my teenage head, you know, what I want to be can do this in a different way or we can do this better.

00;21;50;07 - 00;22;17;16

Joan MacKay

But of course I know recognise she was. Do you always she was putting the energy into what mattered, the people around her, the relationships, making sure that all of that m was working and she didn't want to pay attention to the things that she was being judged on. So if it would do, it would do so if having not me would do it would do if preparing and, you know, preparing for a visit.

00;22;17;20 - 00;22;34;27

Joan MacKay

I mean, it will do. It was enough. And for me, you know, understanding that M is really important because we have a huge job to do in education. And if we go back to what I say to be social justice at the very beginning, we are not there yet. We're doing a good job or not doing a really good job.

00;22;35;05 - 00;22;53;21

Joan MacKay

And part of what gets in the way is fear of making a mistake, fear of not getting it right the first time we do it. I said, I'm working in innovation. Innovation requires generative mess. It requires mistakes and failures and curiosity and opportunities. It doesn't at all need perfectionism.

00;22;54;26 - 00;23;22;00

Joanna Campbell

So that's a great quote, John. I will never remember that. But I think that, you know, the sort of essence offer is correct and also learning to cut corners as well, where appropriate, with diminishing the quality of what it is that we're trying to do. But the other thing I would reflect on when you're saying that is as women, it's our failure to delegate can hold us back.

00;23;22;14 - 00;23;43;08

Joanna Campbell

And certainly as a leader, you have to delegate. You have to trust your team to be able to do what you need them to do, because if we don't, then we're constantly engaged in this, what I would call crowd pleasing activity, which is time consuming. When you're trying to say yes to everything and you're never going to please everyone.

00;23;43;08 - 00;23;59;28

Joanna Campbell

So it's just being comfortable with what it is that you're doing, being comfortable in your own skin and learning to and to delegate and cut corners. And you know, if it's enough to do, then so be it.

00;23;59;28 - 00;24;07;00

Valerie Jackman

John We're coming close to the end. If you had to give your 16 year old self any advice, what would it be?

00;24;08;17 - 00;24;30;14

Joan MacKay

Are So I would say to my 16 year old self, the horizon will always be there. And if I just explain that a little bit. AM As a 16 year old, I was getting ready to be an expert from the police. I was brought up and I was ready to be made ready to, to go to study for that and so on.

00;24;31;01 - 00;24;56;07

Joan MacKay

And I was always fascinated as a child by the fact that you can stand a, you know, at a certain point in the island and you can almost see a 360 degree horizon. And the sea, the sea is going in all different directions, as is the land and it was only much later when I had coaching in my leadership journey, I was asked to think of an image that had an impact on me and this is what came back.

00;24;56;07 - 00;25;18;24

Joan MacKay

And I find that fascinating. But, you know, my place of solace is the horizon, but it's also my place of challenge because the horizon beckons me. There's something there beyond the horizon that is still to be discovered and still to learn. I am. And for me, going on learning, going on discovering for as long as I live and breathe is hugely important.

00;25;19;04 - 00;25;43;12

Joan MacKay

And it's the energy that keeps me going. And, you know, and yesterday, for instance, I just needed to take a break from work and what did I do? I went for a walk to find the horizon and a student that looked at it until my energy was restored and and they came back. So I would say to my 16 year old self who was, you know, thinking about moving away from all of that, the horizon will always be there.

00;25;44;06 - 00;25;45;15

Joan MacKay

That's that's what I will see.

00;25;46;03 - 00;25;58;21

Valerie Jackman

Oh, what a beautiful message. Wow. And if you were to give other women their leadership journey, if you were to give them a couple of tips, what would they be? You know, bits of advice or support? What would it be?

00;25;59;28 - 00;26;30;04

Joan MacKay

So I think the important thing sometimes we ask this question of age what would you want to do to progress your career? I think the progression of your career is far less important because of what it's become in our society than the development of your leadership and so so my focus is on what do we achieve, what do I need to do, what do we need to do to develop our leadership so that we do, you know, doing the best, doing the best we can possibly do to change what needs to be changed.

00;26;30;04 - 00;26;51;13

Joan MacKay

And my leadership will always be about change. We are change is needed and change for the better. So my three things would be first and foremost, be true to yourself, really true to yourself. Know who you are. And I think that goes sadly awry in, you know, all the conversation we've had in the past 20 minutes about AM the perfectionism thing getting in the way be true to yourself.

00;26;51;13 - 00;27;20;01

Joan MacKay

Who are you and and what do you believe in? What is your moral purpose? The second one would be do what is right, do what is right and do it right. And again, if you've got perfectionism that will get in the way of doing it right. And on the third one would be, remember, you're humanity and find humour and joy and laughter in every single day.

00;27;20;02 - 00;27;40;19

Joan MacKay

Wherever it is, it will be the am. And that's a perfect antidote to where we sometimes lose balance and and who we are as leaders. And so these would be my mighty, my three tips be true to yourself. Do what is right and do it right and find joy and love that anybody.

00;27;42;00 - 00;27;54;27

Valerie Jackman

Joan Mackay Once again, I have been completely inspired by and by this conversation, so I'm hugely grateful to you for that. Joanna, Do you want to add anything before we finish up?

00;27;54;27 - 00;28;19;00

Joanna Campbell

So just to say? Joan Fascinating as ever, and I was having a wry smile to myself when you were talking about your childhood there and the expectation, and I should disclose at this point that I was actually or I am, I should say, the daughter of a teacher who expected me to go into the teaching profession. And subsequently, I guess you could say I did eventually.

00;28;19;00 - 00;28;41;01

Joanna Campbell

But as you can imagine, I spent a lot of time fighting against that career path. But no, it was really, really fascinating, John. And your insights are really, you know, a something that all of us should take on board in leadership journeys as well. So thank you very much.

00;28;41;20 - 00;29;08;10

Valerie Jackman

Yes, thank you. So I'm going to finish then with a quote that I that I found this morning. It's a quote from Lisa Carmen Wang, and I thought it was very appropriate to finish our conversation today. Lisa said a woman steps into her full power, not when she's finally given permission to do so, but because she realises she never needed permission in the first place.

00;29;09;09 - 00;29;12;20

Joan MacKay

Amen to that one.

00;29;12;20 - 00;29;17;26

Valerie Jackman

So thank you very much, ladies. Bye then.