

Willing & Abel podcast: The power of knowing yourself with executive coach Joanne Smollan

Season 1 of Willing & Abel is brought to you by <M&C Saatchi Abel>, a proudly South African award-winning creative company founded on the principle of Brutal Simplicity of Thought.

[00:00:00] **Jo Smollan:** It's a normal thing. To have generational tension. Right. If you didn't have generational tension, it would mean we are not progressing as a species. But I, I can completely understand that particularly as a Gen X. As a Gen X is, I mean, we came to the world at a time when meritocracy and capitalism were having their moment. And so what that spat out in our generation was a drink, a cup of cement. Toughen the hell up. You claw your way up the corporate ladder. We are competitive. We're resilient. We've got grit. We're individualistic. In our minds, right? Probably, probably the digital natives would think of us as materialistic assholes who have the wrong sort of set of values. Equally...

[00:00:43] **Mike Abel:** Or the Flintstones.

[00:00:45] **Jo Smollan:** Exactly. The Flintstones. I like that.

[00:00:48] **Mike Abel:** Hi, I'm Mike Abel. I'm a business, marketing and communication specialist and co-founder of MNC Saatchi Abel. I'm a family man, a problem solver, a futurist. And an optimist at heart. Welcome to my podcast, Willing and Able, the home of powerful conversations that challenge perspectives. It's a continuation of the ideas and conversations I began in my book. Willing and able. Lessons from a decade in crisis. My guest today is Joanne Smollan, an executive and teams coach based in London, England. She's the founder of Walnut Office, a boutique consultancy, where she focuses on catalysing positive change in organizations within and between people. Welcome Jo, it's so great to have you here today.

[00:01:36] **Jo Smollan:** Thank you, Mike. It's so good to be here.

[00:01:39] **Mike Abel:** We're going to have fun.

[00:01:40] **Jo Smollan:** We are.

[00:01:41] **Mike Abel:** So I have a confession for our listeners today, and that is that I have engaged you in working with me and with my company. And it's because of this that I decided it would be so valuable for our listeners to be invited in to one of our conversations about leadership. So, Jo, I think the one observation to kick off with is, in order to do what you do, you have very deep empathy with people. So I want you to go back to young Jo, little Jo, where do you think this curiosity in people emerged and where do you think you get this kind of special X factor in feeling people's emotions? When did this happen?

[00:02:26] **Jo Smollan:** Joh, you've gone right in, um, as to be expected. And I was an only child for the first 10 years of my life. And for various reasons, I, I grew up as a highly sensitive, emotionally hypervigilant kid. And so I spent a lot of time alone. I spent a lot of time in my own head and I spent a lot of time really attuned to the environment, um, and the sort of emotional state of the environment. So I think it started. really early on. So the first several years of life, part of that was certainly nature. I think by nature, I am a highly sensitive person, but absolutely the, the family environment fit into that. And so, so that started early on. Yeah.

[00:03:07] **Mike Abel:** I can relate to that. I mean, I think that I was quite young when I determined that I was going to be the parent in the home, I don't know how much of that is to do with my enneagram, which I'm sure you'll exposed to the list is at some point, but also, you know, sometimes I guess in childhood when, uh, things aren't going the way you would like them to go. You start kind of navigating or directing them along the path. And that's not to say in my personal instance that I had anything but a, an incredibly happy childhood, which I did, but with significant challenges. But at some point in time, there are certain things where even as a child, you feel you need a, an intervention of sorts.

[00:03:49] **Jo Smollan:** Yeah, completely. And for me, that is the most interesting piece of a person, you know, is that kind of origin story. So not just how they're showing up, but where does it come from? You know, why do you show up the way that you show up? That for me is incredibly interesting. And it's, there's a lot of hard wiring that happens in those first several years. So, you know, you develop defenses as life goes on, but I mean, ultimately your primary ego strategy comes from the first several years of life

[00:04:13] **Mike Abel:** Well, isn't that Khalil Gibran, give me the boy until he's seven and I'll show you the man.

[00:04:18] **Jo Smollan:** Absolutely.

[00:04:19] **Mike Abel:** I also believe in that completely. Um, and it's funny because when I do bump into people today that I haven't seen in 40 years, since I left school, they are still by and large, the same people, you know, where they've gone on to be incredibly successful or not, uh, kind of, you see that, that kind of kiddie spark. And it's funny because, uh, you know, when I've done coaching before aside from you earlier on, uh, you know, kind of have always thought of myself to an extent as little Mike and striding Mike. And I guess the little Mike is the vulnerable person that everybody has in them. And so few people are happy to accept or acknowledge that. Why are people so scared of vulnerability?

[00:05:06] **Jo Smollan:** You spend an entire lifetime trying to protect yourself against being hurt, being unseen, and those defenses serve a very, very important purpose. And so. Vulnerability means being able to drop those defenses and, and lean into the world defenseless. if you genuinely believe unconsciously that those defenses are keeping you safe and sane and seen and alive, it's really, really difficult to drop them.

Obviously different personality types, and I know we'll get into this. Um, have an easier or more difficult time dropping their defenses and leaning into vulnerability, but it's not an easy thing for most people to do. I mean, the reality is vulnerability is baked into part of being, you know, it's part of being human. We can't get away from that. Um, how much of that vulnerability you expose is where the work is.

[00:05:55] **Mike Abel:** Hmm, hmm, well, it's interesting because, you know, I've always believed that vulnerability is strength, uh, people who bring their real and authentic selves to the workplace and are prepared to open up and share things, you know, um, I respect enormously. And it's the people that seem to wear suits of armour every day that I actually battle with because you never get the real person. And I think it's quite hard to build trust without vulnerability. Is that something that you observe in your, in your teamwork? I mean, is vulnerability a core ingredient to building trust with people?

[00:06:35] **Jo Smollan:** Yeah, absolutely. So, I mean, I suppose the guru on vulnerability would be Brené Brown. She talks about vulnerability being a combination of risk, uncertainty, and emotional exposure. Uhm, and emotional exposure is, is part of operating in relationships. You know, you've got to bring yourself with all of your insufficiencies into a team. So definitely that is definitely something that is difficult, but it's just, it's interesting. You talk about, you know, people that are seemingly invincible. Um, and I think about the most extreme example of that. So, uh, David Goggins. character, right? I mean, David Goggins, you know, trained, Navy SEAL training, I think with a broken tibia. I mean, the man is, is a machine. I think he actually calls himself the toughest MF on the planet. I think that's his, that's his by-line. But his, his autobiography is called can't hurt me. That, that tells you all you need to know about people that are tough as nails and incredibly guarded. You know, it generally comes from a place of extreme vulnerability. In the early years of life, you learn that you need to take care of yourself and you need to be armoured to be safe in the world.

[00:07:52] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. It actually fills me with a bit of sadness, uh, when you think of somebody writing a title of a book can't hurt me, because that is obviously the greatest fear or concern in that person's life is overcoming any sense of vulnerability to be kind of this, uh, you know, striding person that isn't connected to feelings or emotional humanity, because that's what you have to be if you can't be hurt. Because I presume it's not just hurt physically. I think it's hurt emotionally as well

[00:08:24] **Jo Smollan:** Absolutely. Can I ask you a question?

[00:08:26] **Mike Abel:** Of course.

[00:08:27] **Jo Smollan:** So this, this child, Michael, what did you call him? Little Mike?

[00:08:30] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, little Mike, Mikey.

[00:08:33] **Jo Smollan:** So do you feel that at different parts in your life, you've over indexed one or the other? Little Mikey versus striving Mike.

[00:08:43] **Mike Abel:** I think I've had to make conscious decisions when not to be vulnerable because I think that my natural setting is to be an unguarded person. You know, I think I'm a good enough street fighter that if it doesn't work out, I can, you know, um, be, uh, maybe more forceful, uh, or clear about my opinion on things. But what I definitely do prefer is to be, you know, human, if I could put it that way, not to be, you know, the businessman, but to be the person, the person who understands business, not the businessman is trying to be a person, if that makes sense. So I'm very happy in a state of vulnerability and, um, uh, being authentically me, but I will change tech within seconds, if I sense that, um, I'm being taken advantage of or, um, where people see kindness is weakness and a lot of people misinterpret kindness and weakness. In fact, before, I think I might've told you the story when I was running a company once, um, I had to give, uh, some people in the organization a dictionary because I think they misunderstood the difference between the word kind and the word weak.

[00:10:10] **Jo Smollan:** Subtle.

[00:10:11] **Mike Abel:** So I'm not beyond, you know, uh, yeah. Uh, trying to educate through my vulnerability. Does that answer your question?

[00:10:18] **Jo Smollan:** It does answer my question and it answers my question through the lens that I understand you best, which is through your personality profile and, and what vulnerability means to somebody that is your personality type. Um, which is a difficult thing to get to because it's, you know, as a, I mean, we'll talk about this later, but as a personality type eight, um, honesty. And being your full self and vulnerability might feel like the same thing. Um, a lot of us think about vulnerability as exposure of our insufficiencies and our weaknesses. And as a personality type eight, that's really hard for you.

[00:10:48] **Mike Abel:** I don't actually know what you're talking about.

[00:10:55] **Jo Smollan:** Yeah. Um, so I think vulnerability means different things to different people.

[00:10:58] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. Yeah. I think it makes a lot of sense. Um, and, and I think that an eight like myself can be quite binary about those in terms of...

[00:11:08] **Jo Smollan:** A little bit, little bit

[00:11:10] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, so we're talking about an eight and we're going to talk about other things. So I think we need to get into helping our listeners understand what is an eight and what does, uh, what does, uh, Enneagram mean? So your LinkedIn profile, uh, the title is organizational development practitioner and executive

coach. So what is your elevator pitch when you describe in layman's terms, what you do, just take us through that.

[00:11:36] **Jo Smollan:** So I help leaders to know and master themselves and I help teams develop new insights, new skills, and new systems to work well together.

[00:11:49] **Mike Abel:** Okay. So for the listeners, that's incredibly valuable because you are either in the workplace or entry in the workplace, or you might even be uh, heading a large company. And I think that far too little time and energy is devoted to this specific space. Now, Joe specializes in something called Enneagram, which is what I first engaged with her around. Do you want to talk to us a little bit about Enneagram and explain the tool and then also talk a little bit about the ones and the twos and the threes.

[00:12:22] **Jo Smollan:** So people would generally be familiar with tools, personality profiling tools, like MBTI Myers Briggs, the disc insights, et cetera, Gallup strength finder. And I had worked with all of those tools and found them to be incredibly interesting and quite useful. Um, the Enneagram is quite different in a lot of ways. It is a personality profiling tool to all intents and purposes. So it's a, you know, kind of think of it as a user manual for people that are in your organization or in your world. And what it does is it divides people into nine primary types. And those nine primary types represent nine ways of viewing the world, nine worldviews, nine primary ego strategies. Now, obviously it sounds very reductionist to cut people into sort of, you know, divide people into nine personality types. We are much more complex than that and the tool itself is incredibly complex. So there are many more layers to that, but at its, at its entry point, there are nine of these personality types and understanding these personality types, um, through the lens of the Enneagram really helps us to understand not just what people do, but why. So because it gives you the why, the tool becomes much stickier from my experience than other tools. People remember their type, they know what it means. And also it's a bit of a transformation map, so it kind of gives you a way out of yourself and out of your own ego fixations, which not a lot of profiling tools do.

[00:13:50] **Mike Abel:** Hmm, hmm. So if you have a look at them, and if I look at, uh, the project that you've done with my company for the last few years, I don't think people understand the importance of understanding one another. So I think that a lot of, you know, uh, a view of Enneagram is I am an X and that is just who I am. Okay, and these are my weak points that I need to overcome. So I need self-awareness, but I think it's equally important to know what the people are that you are working with are. And that calls again, back to that word of authenticity or that word of vulnerability, because to have effective teamwork, it's not just good enough to know who you are. You have to know who other people are in terms of how you connect. So can you talk a little bit about combinations, teamwork, uh, watch out factors? I know it's a very broad subject.

[00:14:42] **Jo Smollan:** That's a big question.

[00:14:43] **Mike Abel:** It's a big question.

[00:14:44] **Jo Smollan:** So we always start with understanding the individual. So understanding your own profile and working on self-mastery first. So you and I did that the first time we worked on the Enneagram together, we sat in the lounge adjacent to your office on the floor and, um, and we did your Enneagram profile. And then we start to look at the teamwork. So what's the team style? What's the team conflict style? What are their strengths? What are their blind spots as a team? How do they all work together? And then we get into the depth of those kind of interrelation dynamics. The nice thing about using a tool is that in some way it gives you a shared language to talk about these things. But it also kind of depersonalizes it. So you get to talk about difficult things in a way that doesn't feel that difficult. So that's the kind of usefulness, um, of that, but it's incredibly important to understand other people in your team and how they tick and how they operate. And it's not for warm and fuzzy reasons. It's because it makes the team more effective. If you understand the other humans on your team, you can operate more effectively.

[00:15:47] **Mike Abel:** Well, they say that that is, uh, in many ways, uh, Siya Kolisi's superpower or Rassi Erasmus is the interpersonal dynamic, the love, the combinations, the, the vulnerability, I guess for your tool to be very effective within a corporate organization or a business like mine, is it requires very high levels of trust, I guess, to engage meaningfully, because if you believe vulnerability is strength, which I certainly do, so bring your authentic self to, to work. I think it was Oscar Wilde who said, you might as well be yourself because everybody else is already taken. And yet people try to mimic other people's behaviours. What advice would you give people around creating a safe environment for an Enneagram to work in their company?

[00:16:36] **Jo Smollan:** So when you start doing this kind of work, creating a container is really important. And what that means is being really, really clear about number one, the intention of the work. Why are we here? What are we trying to get out of this? That's really important. And the second thing is around confidentiality and rules about confidentiality. That's incredibly, incredibly important. So we do always begin the work with making sure that we create a space where people feel safe to share because they know that, you know, what happens on tour stays on tour. And that everybody's arriving with their head and their heart in the right place. That's, that's really, really important.

[00:17:15] **Mike Abel:** Hmm, hmm. And I think that if people aren't there, then, which I've seen you do in workshops, the exercises to bring people closer into that space, because I think that people automatically arrive with fear, you know, uh, what am I going to share about myself that I don't want to share about myself? And I think that within a work context, that's a very real fear. I understand that. Um, what are some of the questions or some of the tools you use? To get people to kind of overcome those.

[00:17:46] **Jo Smollan:** I mean, if I think about the work that I did with you and your partners a while ago, some of the tools that I used, whether consciously or not, was

we got away from our desks and we sat on the floor. I made you take your shoes and socks off.

[00:18:01] **Mike Abel:** Yes, that was very uncomfortable.

[00:18:04] **Jo Smollan:** But I mean, you're a group of really powerful, assertive people. Um, You've, you've got to do a couple of things to get to a place where people are a little bit out of their comfort zone. When you're dealing with people that are super successful, they generally are pretty comfortable with who they are and or how they operate in the world. So sometimes you've gotta ruffle a few feathers to get people there. I do find the actual physical environment, the set makes an enormous difference. So the way that people engage when you're sitting around a boardroom table on a sort of an away day or a team encounter is very different from the way that people engage when they are shoeless on the floor.

[00:18:40] **Mike Abel:** Well, actually we saw that the other day, uh, we had an away day with the leadership team of the agency across the different companies. And there were about, I don't know, 20 of us in a room, maybe a bit more. And last year when we did it, we all sat around a U - kind of shaped a boardroom table. And this year we actually booked a room that is more like a large lounge with sofas and Ottomans and some people sitting on the floor. And the dynamic was totally different and much better. And it seems to me like. Well, I don't think school has changed much since the 1700s. We sit at a hard wooden desk and you all face forward and you don't engage with one another. It's bizarre. It's still like very much, uh, even a Victorian era of schooling today, where I think that people don't put enough thought into how does the environment unlock potential and possibility.

[00:19:31] **Jo Smollan:** Completely. And so I think that's, uh, that's something that you can take to any uh, engagement at work. So for example, feedback sessions, feedback sessions are often done across a desk or in a boardroom more often than not.

[00:19:45] **Mike Abel:** I had all my performance appraisals sitting like a naughty boy across the desk.

[00:19:50] **Jo Smollan:** Of course you did. And that desk says I have positional power. Yeah. You are separate from me. This is an us versus them conversation. That stuff matters. And it's such an easy fix. There's so many ways to fix that kind of dynamic that don't actually cost much time, energy or money.

[00:20:07] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, yeah. And I think that's one of the, I think there are very few gifts that COVID gave the world, but I do think that one of the gifts, you know, they say challenge is your only opportunity for growth. And I guess what came out of it is, uh, flexi working from home, hybrid models, different styles and ways of working. And I think that some of those lessons shouldn't be lost. You know, visa vis, uh, building up engaged environments that are conducive to meaningful conversations, not transactional conversations. And, you know, earlier you, you

referenced, you know, sitting in the lounge next to my office, which was very specific that I've did that because that used to be a boardroom table. And I kind of felt that every conversation there was transactional, it wasn't real. And the dynamic changed completely when I brought in, um, a sense of, going to somebody's house for a cup of coffee as opposed to, you know, the power play, as you say.

[00:21:07] **Book Ad:** Mike Abel's book, *Willing and Able, Lessons from a Decade in Crisis*, captures the stories of clients and partners and the wins, losses, and learnings through his eyes in a career spanning three decades. Whether you're looking for courage or inspiration, to learn what it takes to disrupt industries, or discover how to transform your company meaningfully and truly empower your people, you'll find it between these pages. You can listen to the audiobook on Audible, download it on your Kindle, order it online, or find it at your favourite bookstore.

[00:21:39] **Mike Abel:** So Jo, your website says doing coaching work results in less judgment and more curiosity and compassion. And that really resonates with me and sums up the pillars of, of the podcasts and what we're trying to do here. Lord Jonathan Sacks, um, said that we live in a very unforgiving age, funnily enough. And I think that with a lot of the, I guess, liberal views. A lot of what's happening today is actually not progressive, but regressive or suppressive in many ways. So you do a lot of this work with Enneagram and personality styles, but talk a little bit about where society is at today and Gen X and how those personalities, depending what, what Enneagram you are also plays into this new kind of society of judgment, cancel culture, wokenism. Can you share a little bit about that dynamic?

[00:22:34] **Jo Smollan:** Yeah, for sure. Um, so you and I are Gen Xers working largely with, I think, probably Gen-Yers and, and trying to raise Gen Zers, right? Um, and Mike, it comes up all the time. I would say that that one in three coaching conversations that I have with business leaders, they will reference something that relates to generational tension. The first thing about the generational tension is that it's, it's not just normal, it's incredibly healthy. We should find generations outside of our own to be maddening, um, meaningless. Um, and I think that that's, it's a sign of progress. So I think it's a normal thing.

[00:23:17] **Mike Abel:** That's interesting.

[00:23:18] **Jo Smollan:** To have generational tension.

[00:23:19] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. Right.

[00:23:20] **Jo Smollan:** If you didn't have generational tension, it would mean we're not progressing as a species. Yes. But I can completely understand that, particularly as a Gen X, as a Gen X is, I mean, we came to the world at a time when meritocracy and capitalism were having their moment. And so what that spat out in our generation was a, drink a cup of cement, toughen the hell up. You claw your way up the corporate ladder. We are competitive. We resilient. We've got grit. We

individualistic, um, in our minds, right? Probably, probably the digital natives would think of us as. materialistic arseholes who, who have the wrong sort of set of values. Equally...

[00:24:01] **Mike Abel:** Or the Flintstones.

[00:24:03] **Jo Smollan:** Or the Flintstones. Exactly. The Flintstones. I like that. I'm actually okay with being a Flintstone. There's something gritty and, and, and resilient about being a Flintstone.

[00:24:11] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. I mean, we have to get on our bicycle and ride to the local library.

[00:24:14] **Jo Smollan:** Yeah. And if things weren't working out for you, pull out a club, you club the barrier in your way, you carry on. Right. Um, and I think that, you know, equally I've watched a lot of Gen Xers get incredibly frustrated with what they see on the surface, which can look like. Entitlement, being soft, asking for rights, not focusing on responsibilities, all of these things that we like to label Gen Y and Gen Z with. And so I think the tension is normal. I think the tension is healthy. I think the tension is maddening. And I think that if we take a step back and we ask ourselves what is underneath it, there are fundamental differences. So there are differences in what we believe the purpose of work is. So what you and I believe the purpose of work is and what our sons believe the purpose of work, very, very different, right? What constitutes a job well done? Very, very different. And what incentives matter to us? So those three, these are deep beliefs that are different in the generations. I just think that there's such an incredible invitation there. But what we tend to do is it becomes a tug of war. You know, you kind of, we pull in one direction. The other generation pulls in the other direction and all that happens is everybody's exhausted. You've calloused your hands and there's too much tension in the rope. And so how do we, how do we release a little bit around what our position is? How do we create a little bit of slack in that rope so that we can move towards each other?

[00:25:49] **Mike Abel:** Hmm, hmm. Well, I think, uh, when you talk about this, uh, battle of wills, if you like, uh, I think what's really interesting is. The concept or the notion of respect, because if you disagree, but you respect one another, you'll think there is value there. You'll think that to find that place of mutual understanding or exchange of insights to be worthwhile. Um, how do you get people to get to a place of seeing value? In other people and in other styles, because I guess that is a cornerstone of Enneagram is because you don't do things the way I do things, or because you don't come at them the same way, or you, because you don't think that way. And I think you need that aha moment to say, shit, I can actually learn from this person. There is something here.

[00:26:47] **Jo Smollan:** Exactly.

[00:26:48] **Mike Abel:** And even if I disagree, there is something here. Let's talk about that.

[00:26:53] **Jo Smollan:** To your point, you, you've got to understand the benefit of understanding other people's personality profiles. It's not good enough for most of us to accept that it's the right thing to do. I mean, your personality type, uh, unless you genuinely understand the benefit of something, you genuinely believe in it, what are the chances of you being movable?

[00:27:12] **Mike Abel:** Very low.

[00:27:14] **Jo Smollan:** I would say they tend towards zero, right?

[00:27:17] **Mike Abel:** Yes, At the high level.

[00:27:19] **Jo Smollan:** At the high level, they tend towards zero. Um, but I think there's, there's such enormous value, you know, I mean, you know, my husband and so my husband runs a business and he's an Enneagram type seven and Enneagram type seven is the enthusiastic visionary. What's fantastic about...

[00:27:34] **Mike Abel:** Which he is

[00:27:34] **Jo Smollan:** Which is he is. And the fantastic thing about enthusiastic visionaries is that they are focused on one side of the emotional wheel, which is the positive side. And so they are optimistic. They, um, think that success will happen regardless. They only see positive data points. Which is a great place to be in your own head.

[00:27:56] **Mike Abel:** Yes.

[00:27:57] **Jo Smollan:** But if you have a team full of sevens. I mean, they're going to have a hell of a good time. That's for sure. But somebody needs to be in the room pointing out the negative data points. And before my husband understood the Enneagram, those people for him, typically a person that's either a type six or has a type six thinking style, um, which are people that are more orientated to risk. To the light at the end of the tunnel being a train, um, they tend to be more hypervigilant. He used to think of those people as buzzkill, naysayers, devil's advocates, you know, they were, they were just cramping his style. But the truth is that if he incorporates those data points into his thinking, the quality of his decisions improves. And at the end of the day, I mean, you know, as a, as a person that has led businesses, it is, it is just a series of decisions, ultimately. So people have got to understand the inherent benefit in understanding somebody else's lens. And that's thought diversity, right? Understanding the benefit of thought diversity.

[00:29:02] **Mike Abel:** So what I love about what you're saying is also a different complexion to how we understand the importance of diversity in the workplace. Because diversity, in a very blunt ways, often viewed as, demographics, you know, uh, let me get people from different races, different age groups, different religions, different backgrounds, and that's diversity and what you can have, uh, within a homogenous group demographically is huge diversity in terms of personality styles.

Um, how do we get companies to think differently about diversity? Because I think it's a very simplistic and binary way of looking at it to look at a group and say, well. That's groupthink. They're all the same. Actually, they're not. You've got a two and you've got a three and you've got a seven, you've got a five and you've got an eight and they're all entirely different types of personalities and profiles. Um, and I think that again, in this new world, we kind of judging things superficially, um, under the ruse of depth. And I think that there are very meaningful conversations that need to happen around diversity. Anything that you want to share around. that concept or thought?

[00:30:17] **Jo Smollan:** Yes, I think, I think the two things are really deeply entwined with one another. So I think that the fact that a person is, uh, you know, Jewish, gay, female, is really a, an enormous piece of how they show up in the room. So I think that generally those kinds of identity things, those kinds of demographics do bring some kind of diversity in the room for sure. Right? But absolutely there's this piece that we, we under index, which is diversity of thought. And that's the beautiful thing about the Enneagram is we get to have a look at this and say, do we have an echo chamber in this room or do we actually have all of the kinds of thinking, acting, feeling, engaging that we need?

[00:31:01] **Mike Abel:** Well, I mean, you know, I had a very interesting conversation the other day with somebody who, uh, was telling me that they knew this young man that had become a woman and she is now getting married to a woman. And so I said, well, that's very interesting for me, because you would imagine that as a man, he would have been happy to get married to a woman versus becoming a woman. And then marrying a woman because I didn't understand it at all. And the person said, well, you failing to understand that there's a difference between gender and identity.

[00:31:40] **Jo Smollan:** Well, gender identity and sexuality

[00:31:42] **Mike Abel:** and sexuality. Exactly. And I found that completely fascinating because it was something that I didn't understand it all. And I'm a deeply curious man. I like to understand people and I hate any form of intolerance or any form of judgment. You know, that is kind of like a red rag to a bull. So it was so fascinating for me to go there because I thought to myself, I'm learning something really powerful here. And if somebody like that had to be in my family or work with me, how I would embrace their potential and their life journey. But, uh, I think that these are things that generationally we've actually never had to encounter before.

[00:32:24] **Jo Smollan:** Nope. I mean, that's why we have children, right? So that we can get permanently schooled.

[00:32:30] **Mike Abel:** Haha, that's true.

[00:32:32] **Jo Smollan:** I mean, I remember at university, I know this is a very unusual thing, but I was studying speech pathology and audiology at university way back

when, and we had, a trans woman in the clinic that was coming for voice therapy. I mean, this was 1995, 96 in South Africa and coming to the voice clinic to, to learn how to speak like a woman. So how to raise your larynx so that your pitch is higher. Um, how to use the kind of intonation that women use, um, that kind of word choice women have. You know, so that was, I mean, that was early days, but, but yeah, absolutely. And I mean, my children school me all the time, invited or not invited. I get schooled on the regular.

[00:33:17] **Mike Abel:** Well, I think that's the role of families and spouses. I mean, you don't always say, you know, Uh, to the world, Albert Einstein was a genius, but to his wife, he was the fool that left his undies on the bathroom floor. You know, I think so. There's always that level of, you know, vulnerability, I guess, that you learn from your family and they always the ones to kind of slap you into, into place.

[00:33:38] **Jo Smollan:** So if we could bring that perspective of generational, intergenerational openness into teams at work, it would be a much better place. So, you know, at home we have to open up to our children. We adore our children. We have to listen to them. They're around the dinner table. We're interested in their opinions. The problem is you go into the workplace, you're much less interested in the opinions of other people. So if we can bring that kind of attitude.

[00:34:02] **Mike Abel:** Well I think again, as Gen X, we are the first generation that has listened to our children or believed we need to learn from our children. I think societally, until this moment in time, uh, and we're talking about millennia, you know, in terms of modern man, uh, being women people before I get cancelled, um, there's never been something about learning from your children or believing that your children have anything to add or to share. And they've got immense value to add, you know, uh, and I think also generationally in the workplace, you know, I learn an enormous amount. Uh, look, I don't look at people's age at all. You know, I'm quite happy to make somebody the CEO of a company when they 30 years old and somebody can be 50 and withering on the vine because they don't have the potential. So, so I, I, I'm completely in that space, but what I'm loving about this is. Um, you know, I've attended funerals of my friend's parents where they've said about their dad, we never really knew him. He was a very private man. And it's a profound tragedy to actually live your life, not believing that you can be vulnerable again, opening up, I don't think that those, that generation intended to be disconnected. I think it was the way they were raised. And so for us, who's actually at a transitional phase, really, we are just learning the hell out of whatever we can right now. And that is why I think that, you know, I so wanted to have this conversation with you because, you know, for the younger people, this thing, this comes so naturally to them, but for our generation, it doesn't at all.

[00:35:49] **Jo Smollan:** I mean, my dad used to say, he said, my dad said three things. One was children should be seen and not heard, which was, which was something that I think most of us have heard. The second was there is only one captain of the ship and there were no prizes for guessing who that captain was. And the third thing that he said to me, um, which I think you'll appreciate is he said, Joanne, there is a

four letter word found only in the dictionary and that was his perspective. And he held really tightly to that.

[00:36:22] **Mike Abel:** Well, I do think that it is quite liberating, um, to understand that the world is chaotic and random and the concept of fairness is a notional one, you know, because of course there is, there are things that are fair or unfair. But, uh, I don't know who it was that wrote that book about why bad things happen to good people, which I think touches on the concept of fair, you know, or fairness. And I think that what one needs to do is to fight for fairness. You know, uh, change happens in the world as a result of friction. You know, when two kind of opposing rocks clang against one another, you get a spark when they're moving in the same direction, there isn't a spark. And I think we need to embrace sparks. I think people reject sparks.

[00:37:11] **Jo Smollan:** Absolutely. But having said that, you and other type eights are the only type in the Enneagram profile that is energized by conflict. So even if you don't like conflict.

[00:37:26] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. Which I don't actually.

[00:37:27] **Jo Smollan:** Yeah, but you find it energizing. Yeah. You get energy from conflict. So it's important to know that other types don't, which is why a lot of them will deal with conflict in much less direct ways than you. But yeah, I agree with you. Can I ask you a question about your, about your late dad? Sure, of course you can. Do you feel like you knew him?

[00:37:44] **Mike Abel:** Deeply. Yeah. Um, and I'll, I'll tell you why I think I knew him. So he had, uh, a difficult upbringing. You know, his, uh, mother was a, a Polish woman who moved here in her mid-twenties because she was escaping the Holocaust. It was before the Holocaust, but she saw the writing on the wall already. Uh, five years before it happened, the growth of, uh, of antisemitism. She came from a town called Lomza in Poland. And, uh, she arrived here and, uh, and a short lady, very short in stature and a deeply, deeply religious woman. Um, and she married a tall strapping guy, because I think that genetically her parents probably thought, or her mother. My, my, uh, great grandfather didn't, uh, leave Poland. He passed away there. So he had a bakery, uh, because don't forget in those days, you weren't allowed to have education, you had to become, you know, a shoemaker or a baker or whatever, you know, um, because of prejudice and so, uh, you know, she came and she married what would be referred to as a Boerejode, an Afrikaans speaking Jewish girl that had grown up in the country, so you've got two kinds of really different people. And because there was quite a lot of friction, uh, my dad was basically shipped from pillar to post to kind of grow up with aunts and uncles and his grandmother. And I don't think that that was easy for him at all. And so he became quite a closed and private guy, but in 1956, I think that he must've been, he was born in 35, he'd have been 21 years old.

He went to the Israeli army because Israel as a country was only eight years old at the time and was facing an existential crisis every day of her life. And so he went and did that. And I think that, well not I think, I know that during his time there, he saw such terrible things and he lost so many friends in the battles, you know, with the hostile neighbours that he had PTSD. And it was quite hard for me to grow up with a father who had, you know, post-traumatic stress disorder. Um, and so my childhood with him was really, really not easy. You know, my dad and I found each other properly, I think when I was about 18. And, uh, and I think that we, we boxed quite a lot cause we were quite similar. Not different, you know, my brother and my sister who are very different to him, he got along famously with, but, and I don't think people understand that, you know, um, and then, you know, he died at the beginning of this year. And so, uh, what am I now? I'm 56 years old. So I would say for the last 38 years, he and I had an immensely close friendship and relationship.

Uh, where he became very vulnerable. Where he was actually an entirely different man to the one that I grew up with until age 18. And, you know, if he had passed away when I was 18 years old, I would absolutely have been able to say, I didn't know my dad at all because I didn't, but after that, uh, I did, I don't know if that answers your question.

[00:40:50] **Jo Smollan:** Yeah, it does. I mean, I'm glad for you that. That you knew him so deeply. And I know because of the kind of father that you are, I know that your boys know you well.

[00:40:59] **Mike Abel:** Yeah. Well, I learned from that relationship that, um, I was not going to be like my dad at all, who was an exceptionally good sportsman. And although I was competent or am competent at sport, I didn't have his natural ability, which he would then rub in my face at every opportunity, because he wanted me to play first team rugby for Grey, like he did. And I just was going to be kind of in the fifth or the sixth team. I was never going to get close because I didn't have his natural flair, understanding of the game or intuition, no matter how much I love the sport, which I do.

Um, and so for my kids, it was very important for me to feel unjudged. And I did grow up feeling judged, uh, by my parents, both of them. You know, and, and I think that that helped me. I think a lot of kind of striding Mike that we talk about is because, um, it was to prove something, to push myself, to show that I could do it. I don't know if I would have, or wouldn't have without, because it's a moot point. I don't know.

[00:42:03] **Street Ad:** The street store turns 10 this year. The world's first rent free, premises free, free pop up store provides a dignified shopping experience to those in need, allowing them to choose from a selection of pre loved clothing and shoes.

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[00:42:30] **Mike Abel:** So let me throw the question back to you. Um, no, because it's very interesting, Jo, in terms of, um, the vulnerability that you have. You know, you're a very, very smart person. You, um, are highly educated, um, and yet, and, kind of very striding within the corporate world and dealing with very high powered people as you do every day. Um, how is it that you've been able to kind of harness your vulnerability as you have as such a powerful strength? What do you think it is that's allowed you to do that? Therapy. That's a good answer.

[00:43:10] **Jo Smollan:** Therapy.

Mike Abel: That's a good answer.

Jo Smollan: I mean, I got into therapy when I was 20 years old at the back of an eating disorder and I'm 47 now and I've gone once a week. So I've been in therapy religiously for my entire adult life. So I mean that, and, you know, marrying the right person and, you know, friends and working with people that I look up to and various other ways of doing the self-work, but I think the primary thing would be therapy.

[00:43:38] **Mike Abel:** And a lot of people that are going to be listening right now are going to think, Oh my word, I can't believe she just admitted that she's been in therapy for all these years. Without understanding that that is exactly why you are where you are in your life today.

[00:43:53] **Jo Smollan:** I'll tell you a story about my husband. So 23 years ago, this time, my husband and I were on our first holiday together in Knysna and we were walking around. We came from very different backgrounds. We were walking around, uh, leisure isle in Knysna as we did every day. And I just dropped into conversation. I mean, we were three months into a relationship. I just dropped into conversation. Yeah, and I was talking to my therapist about, and he stopped, took a breath, we carried on walking, and we spent the next four kilometres with Um, him trying to figure out what was wrong with me because I was in therapy and me trying to figure out what was wrong with him because he wasn't in therapy. And I would say that that, that conversation was there for probably the first 12 or so years of our relationship. Um, and I'm very happy to say that my husband, my husband is now in therapy once a week, an enormous advocate for therapy, and I can see just the, the depth of emotional intelligence that he has developed and the psychological richness of his life from being willing to go into those places, you know, that sevens do not like to go.

[00:45:10] **Mike Abel:** Yeah, yeah. Well, that's, uh, I mean, that's interesting. I mean, I've certainly had therapy myself, uh, when I lost my mom, uh, you know, that was like a big thing that I had to get around in terms of dealing with loss because I tend to deal with things unemotionally, I deal with things, um, in a very functional and logical way. And my wife Sara, uh, who you know, uh, insisted that I go and deal with loss emotionally because my natural setting is an eight and a self-preservation eight is for the metal doors to start coming down and, you know, I'm all right and, uh, and it's such a limited life experience, you know, and I'll never forget, uh, the therapist that I

saw at the time said something really interesting to me, which has stuck by me all these years, which is, he said to me, sometimes in your darkest place lies your greatest reward. And I think that people are so scared to open themselves up where they don't actually understand what levels of growth and opportunities for happiness lie on the other side of vulnerability. You know, the, a lot of people get to old age without knowing themselves, let alone other people not knowing them. And I think that that's got to be a profound tragedy to waste this one journey where you aren't prepared to even know yourself.

[00:46:39] **Jo Smollan:** Absolutely. You know, I always say to my kids, don't chase happiness as a feeling. Chase psychological richness. That's what you want. You want to feel all the things, experience all emotions that life has to offer you. That to me is a full life. It's very difficult getting my 17 year old who's also an enneagram seven to buy into that. But, but yeah, I think psychological richness is, it's what makes you grow and it's what makes you, makes you feel alive ultimately. Um, but as an eight for sure, you know, self-preservation eight, you do have a baked in metal door, but I would imagine it shows up in your, in your body then, right? So you get things done. And you move into action as a way of avoiding whatever's made you feel vulnerable, in this case the loss. Do you somatise any of it? So does it come up in your body in any way if you don't do emotional processing?

[00:47:33] **Mike Abel:** Well, sorrow will often accuse, I think is the right word. I think that wife, wives or husbands accuse one, I think she'll often, you know, accuse me of being stressed about something and what is it? And then that forces me to think about what it is because my natural setting isn't to do that. My natural setting is, you know, soldier on move, you know, exactly. And when you are somebody who views themselves as I do as a saviour of others, you know, um, I've always loved the saying that in life you get because of what you give, not because of what you take. And the same therapist that said to me, sometimes in your darkest place lies your greatest reward, also said to me, Mike, you need to realize that sometimes in life you need to take in order to give.

[00:48:25] **Jo Smollan:** You need to be saved on some level. That's the vulnerability work for you. Yeah. You know, the work for you is not. I think the work for you is not in being, the work for you in vulnerability is less, I think about being honest and bringing your full authentic self to the room. I don't think that's difficult for you. I think that's baked into who you are. I don't think you know how not to do that. I think...

[00:48:51] **Mike Abel:** but it gets awkward for other people sometimes. And then it, then it sucks, but strange because it's like, it does come naturally to me

[00:48:57] **Jo Smollan:** As a lot of AIDS would say, that's a you problem, but yes, yes. So, so sensitivity, you know, the variance on sensitivity levels. So baseline sensitivity, amplitude of reaction to triggers and how long it takes you to get over things between the most sensitive and the least sensitive person on earth, 3000%. And so, so there's massive variability in terms of how people take stuff, but I think the work

for you and for eights generally is. Yeah, you know, can you, can you be saved? Can you, can you allow others to save you?

[00:49:39] **Mike Abel:** Well, I've learned that I have to. As uncomfortable as it is, and it is uncomfortable for me, even today. You know, I've got my same best friends that I grew up with from the beginning. I mean, my friends have been friends of mine for 56 years, you know, 45 years, my schoolmates. I love You know, and, and even within them, I do battle with vulnerability, you know, because just because it's not a natural setting, but that's how you grow and you learn. I'm going to change track a little bit here in terms of, we know so much about behaviours and you've learned so much through, uh, Enneagram and your kind of deep self-awareness. What are some of the important things that you've changed your mind about?

[00:50:22] **Jo Smollan:** Optimism.

Mike Abel: Are you less optimistic?

Jo Smollan: No, I'm more optimistic. No, I think I was born with very sort of, just sort of worst case scenario, hypervigilant and I saw my husband and all the rest of you optimists as, as, I mean, it's terrifying to be an optimist. You're going to get disappointed. You're not looking out for the right data points. It seems superficial. It seems ridiculous. And what I have learned through the Enneagram and through being married for a long time to an optimist is that it's better and it's a choice. You can actually teach yourself to, to reframe.

[00:50:58] **Mike Abel:** Well, I'm very pleased to hear that because, um, in my binary fashion, I have very little time for pessimists because I think that pessimists precipitate a bad outcome.

[00:51:11] **Jo Smollan:** Thank God I changed, Mike, before I met you.

[00:51:14] **Mike Abel:** Exactly. We wouldn't be chatting now. But, but in seriousness, like I've never seen a positive outcome from negativity. So I think, well, if I could see a positive outcome from negativity, then I might indulge in that mindset, but, you know, I believe that when you want something badly enough, the universe conspires to give it to you. And I do believe in putting positive energy into the universe. And I think somebody that wrote that book, the secret I've never read the secret, but I think it's about that kind of stuff is to put positive shit into the environment and good stuff. And in one way or another. The universal conspire to make your dreams come true. And, uh, and I do believe that cause I've seen that play out within my own, uh, life, you know, uh, one of my business partners describes me as having a reality distortion field, you know, being able to bend the universe in such a way as to suit my will. Uh, and I don't know if it is that so much as opposed to just simply not allowing negativity to be. The pervasive or sustained state of mind. How do you work with negative people? How do you occasion an epiphany in the minds of negative people for them to see the futility of that situation? Is that, is that deep therapy? I mean, how does one do that?

[00:52:37] **Jo Smollan:** Well, I don't think therapy got me to be more optimistic. It's so interesting what you say about the way that you, cause you reframe as an age, you reframe as challenges and you don't see a barrier as something that's in your way. That means you have to take a different route. You see, I mean, you need to get out of Flintstone club, club, the barrier and press on. Different people grow up in different ways. And I think some people are negative because they have had to be tuned into negative data. So sometimes it's really deep work that needs to happen. And I'm not a therapist. So sometimes you have people that are pessimistic because it's actually a survival instinct for them. And so that's deeper work. I love working in a team where you've got people that are, and I don't like to call them pessimists in the team, um, but people that are focused on risk, um, and people that are focused on possibility. And having both of those thinking styles in a room is actually the most useful thing that you can have. And then you can do, I mean, the tools available, you know, six hats thinking Edward de Bono stuff, um, to allow people to get out of their fixations. Again, the Enneagram is there to help you to get out of your fixations. And, and a particular way of thinking is a fixation.

[00:53:51] **Mike Abel:** And I think that fixations can sometimes also be a very useful thing if you know how to control them, um,

[00:53:57] **Jo Smollan:** say more,

[00:54:00] **Mike Abel:** Preach brother. But, but I do, you know, I have a deep seated fear of failure And I think that that has played quite a large role in my I'm loathe to use a poncy word like success, but I guess that is the right word. You know, there's that great saying of failing to prepare is preparing to fail. And today too many people I do feel try to wing it. You know, because information is so accessible at any point in time, I'm often dealing with people that have a very superficial knowledge of the world. Well, I think that the most influential person on environmental matters in the world has never studied the environment. I think she's just picked up a picket fence and she's got angry with people and she's marched on the streets and I'm not a fan in any way. I like people to know their shit, you know, before I listen, it's like, what do you really know? And I do think that there's too little appreciation today for it's too much is led by in my view and it might be my style, but by opinion as opposed to knowledge. And I think that they're very different things.

[00:55:08] **Jo Smollan:** And I think that is part of intergenerational tension. Yeah. Because I think that if we think about our children, what worries me the most. I mean, I have a list somewhere on that list is what is actually happening neurologically to these kids. So what is happening in terms of their attention and learning, and rewards system circuitry? Because they are number one, used to absorbing very short form content. It's getting shorter and shorter and shorter. Right. It used to be, I mean, YouTube was short. Now it's YouTube shorts.

[00:55:41] **Mike Abel:** I call it chappies rapper knowledge.

[00:55:44] **Jo Smollan:** Exactly. Oh yeah. I remember that. Oh, I chappies. So there's that. And then there's this sort of dopamine system hijack that happens. Right. And you can actually change your neurochemistry because you need. More and more and more to be able to get the desired effect. And that dopamine circuitry is the circuitry that's involved in attention, learning, reward, et cetera, et cetera. And so, you know, they, they are in a time where they never have to delay gratification, seldom have to delay gratification. And, and their brains are changing accordingly. So it's...

[00:56:19] **Mike Abel:** it's a big challenge.

It is a big challenge.

Mike Abel: And I think that if you don't need to wait for stuff, uh, because it's all there and available, maybe in and of itself, that's not problematic because it will always be available, you know, the great buffet of life, you know, whereas for us, we needed to wait for something, you know, I mean, I just think of how when I grew up and it was my birthday, I would get a present from my parents, you know, and it would be modest, you know, and today, you know, it's kind of Christmas, 10 boxes under the tree and you know, it's kids today go in life, uh, metaphorically or in real terms, from one box to the next box, to the next box, opening it at will to see if they like what's in the box, as opposed to this is your one box and just make the most of it.

[00:57:10] **Jo Smollan:** Completely. Completely. And actually for me, a big part of trying to become a better parent is trying to lean more into curiosity and allowing, which is not easy for me. I mean, I like to hold pretty tight to reins. As a person. But, you know, looking at the way that my kids are accessing information and, and what they need for the future, um, it's very, very different from what we needed. I mean, I remember, do you remember TV? So TV for us was, Monday night was Dynasty at nine o'clock. Then you waited until Tuesday night to watch Dallas if your parents let you, because it was not quite late. And also. He was bad, JR. Um, and then Wednesday afternoon, you'd come home and watch Growing Pains. If you had an afterschool activity, you know, you would have to set the recorder with your Betamax, or if you were lucky VHS, and then you would have to, then you'd have to label it because potentially your sibling would record over the thing that you'd recorded. I was a completely different world. No wonder we have tension in the room.

[00:58:12] **Mike Abel:** Well, that's right. I mean, I do remember having to save up for vinyl and, you know, getting on my bike and riding to CNA and buying my, you know, single or the whole record or whatever. Uh, and, uh, but at the same time, I think that kids have become very creative with this choice. I'm sure you feel the same way, but let me just speak for myself. When I look at my three boys, men, uh, 23, almost 21, almost 16. Uh, I'm very hopeful for the world, actually. I think they super, super smart. I think they're very kind, very grounded, very engaged and curious individuals. So through all of this, uh, kind of excess and, uh, choice on tap and whatever, um, I think that with good values at home, this could be a, this is, not could be, this is a remarkable new generation I'm seeing emerge.

[00:59:10] **Jo Smollan:** Agree, agree. I would say that my kids compared to the way that I was growing up are much more creative. I think I was a creative kid, but I mean, they are just. Well...

Mike Abel: At another level.

[00:59:23] **Jo Smollan:** At another level and much more courageous. They're just braver. You know, I think, you know, you had that sort of fear of failure. You know, we all, we had this kind of linear way of moving through the world. And then, you know, Gen X, you just, what was his name? Billy Ocean. When the going gets tough, the tough get going. That was our anthem, right? You just 'vas byt' and you just try harder. And they just don't seem to be tethered by those things. Um, yeah.

[00:59:50] **Mike Abel:** Joe, we're in the homestretch of this conversation, which I've loved every second of. And I think that, uh, for those listening, I mean, it's the most vulnerable that, you know, I'm likely to be on these podcasts and thank you for always bringing that out of me and for sharing so generously your, your own journey. And we're going to end on, uh, on a problem, but in a positive way. And my question to you is. What is the best problem that you've ever had?

[01:00:18] **Jo Smollan:** The best problem I've ever had, I would say would be having grown up with some struggle, with some emotional struggle and with a lot of financial struggle. I don't think I would take that away. I don't think I would, I would have had it any differently. I think it forced me to be entrepreneurial. It forced me to be creative. It forced me to be self-reliant. So I think that's a problem that I had growing up that I'm grateful I had.

[01:00:50] **Mike Abel:** Well, Margaret Thatcher said she was born with two distinct advantages. She had good parents and they were poor.

[01:00:59] **Jo Smollan:** Yes, similar, similar, similar story.

[01:01:03] **Mike Abel:** And I think that, uh, that people don't really understand the importance. You know, we spoke earlier about, uh, this old mystical belief, which actually comes from the Kabbalah or Kabbalah, as they say in America, which is challenge is your only opportunity for growth. And I've said it a couple of times here and, uh, and that is how people grow. You know, people don't realize that beauty lies in problems. In fact, I've done a Ted talk about beauty lies in problems. And, you know, if you run away from them, they chase you when they, they beat you up, but if you run towards them, it's amazing what you can learn from them. And I think that you've, you've articulated that beautifully. I want to thank you so much for sharing your insights with us today. And, uh, I'm so sad that you, that you live in London now, because, uh, I'd love to see a lot more of you, but thank you for making time on your holiday. To come and share your wisdom, um, which is deeply insightful and inspirational. And I hope that, uh, that our listeners emerge with more bravery to be in touch with the emotions. So thank you. Thank you.

[01:02:09] **Jo Smollan:** Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. It is always good to have conversations with you. So I've, I've loved this time too. Thank you.

[01:02:23] **Mike Abel:** So you've shown how vital it is to dig a bit deeper than just the surface and to really get to know ourselves. If we are to grow as individuals and to make meaningful contributions in our personal, our business, our private relationships with others, whether that is at home or in our communities, and I think to bring our real authentic self. Thanks so much for listening today. If you've enjoyed this podcast, why not leave us a five star review. Tune into Willing and Able next time for more conversations that challenge perspectives.

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