

Tavener: Hey, Michael.

Horn: Hey, Diane.

Tavener: We're at the end of season four of our podcast, the last one before we go on summer break, such as it is, and we figure out exactly what season five is going to look like.

Horn: I guess that just says we're a little bit more traditional than perhaps we like to think of ourselves, but we're also at the end of something else, Diane, which is the end of 20 years of you leading Summit Public Schools. It's something we've talked about a few times obviously this season, but now that we're actually here, I want to know how it feels like. I will say we recently celebrated the retirement of the head of school that my girls go to. She had been there for 17 years leading it. It was amazing to see all the people turn out from across all the time that she had been there just in love and celebration of this individual. So you must be having a set of moments right now.

Tavener: Well, I am having a set of moments and I have to keep reminding people that I'm not retiring. That's a little bit different, but I appreciate you asking and always checking in. I'll be honest, it feels amazing. I'm so grateful to have many people who've modeled and supported a really thoughtful succession plan, a whole process, and that's been followed by a really intentional onboarding and offboarding experience. My successor, Cady Ching, who you've met, is a values-based leader with really incredible skills and experiences. She's working collectively with a phenomenal group of leaders. I feel really inspired by their collective leadership and hopeful for the future of Summit. I am totally energized as I turn to my entrepreneurial roots and tendencies and get ready to start something new.

Horn: Well, I hope you'll share that with the audience next season, but I'm not going to ask that now. I'm mainly just going to say it's awesome to hear. I will also say, Diane, for me, it brings a lot of emotions as well because I still remember the first time I met you at the Philanthropy Roundtable event in San Francisco and just how giddy I was that someone who led a school network speaking my language and for so many years, Summit, as you know, has been the prime example I'd point to when people would ask me what that transformation I was speaking about might look like. It's also been an example of how schools can improve and innovate to get there. Then when the pandemic began, obviously, we started this podcast to serve as this resource for what schools could look like and why they didn't have to remain frozen and what they've been. I'll just be honest, I don't think I honestly thought or ever imagined we'd still be doing the podcast when you decided to step down from leading Summit. That just wasn't in my realm of possibility.

But it does lead me to a question, Diane, which is, I'm just curious if you've had any anxieties or fears over the decision even after you've made it. I know that's a personal question, so you can take it however you'd want.

Tavener: Well, Michael, one of the things that I've appreciated over the last four years of podcasting together is the gentle nudging of each other to be personal and be

vulnerable in our conversations. For me, that's been a big part of the learning and the enrichment. I've come to believe it's imperative in the work we do and in life in general and so I welcome your wondering. I think my reflection is at several points over the last year, I have experienced fear over the transition. Most days, I feel excited and confident and clear and purposeful and I have a positive vision for what my post-Summit life will look like. For me, the fear comes in these flashes. It's almost like a flashback sequence in a movie. I don't know if you remember that crazy movie from years ago, Sliding Doors, with I think Gwyneth Paltrow.

So it's like those moments. What happens is I get a glimpse of my life after leaving Summit and it's terrible. I'm totally unhappy in the work I'm doing. I'm not successful or I'm not having impact and I feel controlled or all the ingenuity or wonder. Entrepreneurship is gone and just a whole laundry list of things that for me personally would feel really bad. When those flashes happen, I actually feel them physically, like my heart starts to race and I feel physically impacted. That stuff goes away pretty quickly, but what I've discovered is what lingers behind is this questioning and doubt that can seep in. What that means is I have to spend a lot of time and dialogue with myself, if you will, to walk through the soundness of my choices and my expectations for what's coming next and if I'm being totally honest and realistic with myself. It takes me a while to get myself centered again and to be able to move forward with a positive mindset and with confidence.

So those are not easy moments and I'll be honest, I'm often too embarrassed to talk to people about them, but more and more, I'm trying to open up. And of course, it's so much better to engage with people who I love and I trust, not because they say things are going to be all right because that's not what I'm looking for or need, but because they authentically engage in that more important conversation I'm having with myself and make it a lot richer and more productive and quite frankly, not like I'm talking to myself. So that's always a good thing too. So just thank you for asking and listening and always engaging with me. You have been such a trusted friend and partner through this transition. I guess it's making me wonder now if you're asking this because I'm aware of at least a few different experiences you've had lately that I know you've been really reflecting on this role of fear and anxiety in and around our schools. I think there might even be a hypothesis for me in there and so just curious about where it's coming from.

Horn: Yeah. Well, I'll go there in a moment. I just want to say thanks for sharing that. I'm glad I asked and you're not just sharing it with me, you're sharing it with a public audience. I know that that takes some courage, but I think it's important to talk about these things. I asked because you know are right, I don't think you're alone right now. I think people in general and those in our work have a lot of fear and anxiety and fear and anxiety, that's the topic I wanted to address today and perhaps a little bit of the habit of the present, if you will. I'll explain that phrase later. I should probably be more specific about all this and maybe a little less inscrutable perhaps to our audience, Diane.

Tavenner: Well, I know it's something you've been thinking about. It's been on your mind for a while and I certainly have benefited from our conversations and so it seems reasonable for me to bring them to this more open dialogue. And yes, we would love you to be more specific and ground us in what is really prompting this conversation.

Horn: Yeah. I'll try to stay at a high level and not go too detailed, but what prompted my desire to talk about anxiety and fear and maybe people's habits was this. I was talking recently to a head of school over coffee and she was telling me these stories about how much the schooling community has changed from pre-COVID to now. She was telling me that parents don't communicate with the school anymore and that they instead just talk to each other and work themselves in this frenzy over everything that happens, whether it's big or small, and it's over all sorts of issues, Diane. It's from school security, which you and I have talked about on the show to gender issues. You can imagine it, right? And pre-COVID, the school had said that parents would just come in and talk to her much earlier once the issue arose. There was an open door. They would just come in. But now, they're not doing that.

And the parents, whether it's in small little communities or even bigger, they egg each other on. Whether that's on social media or text message threads or WhatsApp groups, I don't know, but you can almost feel how this would occur. Out of these frenzies, the head of school just told me this awful story of how she got bullied online and her staff getting bullied and it sounded truly dreadful. Hopefully I'm not giving you any PTSD out of this right now, but it's happening all over the country in schools, in public schools, in private schools. While this individual story, I think, is bad, what I actually heard beneath it is that I think this is really a story of fear and anxiety and that this fear and anxiety is driving a lot of this sort of behavior right now that we see, and it's frankly on all sides of these tense issues. Now, please, please understand, and for those listening, please understand I am not justifying bad behavior or anyone's actions, but more I'm just trying to figure out what's going on.

My thought is that if we understood what's going on, maybe there'd be a more effective way to tone down these conversations and get to a place where we could be civil and find places of agreement rather than just searching to skewer people over disagreements, Diane.

Tavener: Yeah. Well, Michael, while you are causing me PTSD, I am resonating with the story you're telling and what you're beginning to explore. This is a very real and present situation for me right now and not just for me, for so many of the education leaders that I know and it's been helpful to talk through it with you and them and others. As you know in my role as the head of Summit, I too have been, and I'm not sure what to call it, I've never called it bullying before and I flinched a bit when you said bully, but when I think about the definition of bullying and what has happened, I think it's a pretty accurate phrase to describe what's happened. Anyhow, over the last few years, school board members from our authorizers, parents, and teachers have, in a variety of way, sought to harm, intimidate, coerce me with inflammatory language, false accusations, personal attacks, and all of it has been in public forums, about as public as you can get.

This is top of mind for me right now because as I prepare to transition and as I think about Cady being the leader of Summit, I'm really concerned that the way that I've handled this is not going to set her up for success. I've actually started to question the wisdom of how this is handled. What I mean by that is I made the decision along with my team to, for the most part, not respond to the attacks. The idea was that people who matter know they aren't true and responding would actually escalate things and

also pit me against people who I need to work with on behalf of our students and our schools. The idea was if I just put my head down and did the work without letting the attacks get to me, that at some point, the folks would realize they weren't working for whatever they were trying to accomplish and they would give them up.

I'm not sure if that was a bad strategy in that I haven't spent a lot of time and energy fighting these things. They haven't swayed me or changed my behaviors or decisions, but they also haven't stopped, Michael. And now, I'm really worried that in not addressing them, I might have enabled a habit or in some strange way, given permission to folks to now attack Cady when I think about that just because they're used to just doing that and they think it's okay. When I think about that, it feels unacceptable. It's funny that I'm saying it's unacceptable for her, but it was somehow acceptable for me. So that's a whole other issue. But as I'm saying this out loud, I'm realizing you talked about the habit of fear and anxiety, which is making me wonder how you're thinking about that and what that means in this scenario.

Horn: Yeah. Well, firstly, let me say, I'm sorry you're dealing with this as well, although I don't think I'm surprised. I guess as usual, I like to tackle these things through theory for better or worse, so let me give a bit more context, then I'll go from there. I obviously heard the pain of the school head that I was talking to and a few others, and I identified with that, but I could also almost implicitly feel the fear of the parents. I think for them, it's like the fear of the unknown, a fear of a lack of security, fear of what's being taught to my child, whatever the issue is. Fear or a perception of threat or anxiety, we know from so many different research streams and so many different examples, whether it's Amanda Ripley's work on [High Conflict](#), which is a terrific book, or Bob Moesta's Jobs-To-be-Done work, or Clark Gilbert's work on threat rigidity or Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky's Nobel Prize-winning work on loss aversion and on and on, that fear, anxiety, perception of threat, it drives paralysis and it drives one to really root in one's current position.

I'm just going to lock down and stay planted here, which can, in turn, in certain situations at least, lead to what Ripley calls the power of the binary, this factionalization and a creation of two camps, your camp versus "the other." So rather than think, oh, those parents, they don't just get it or vice versa, I think we might need to take a different approach and acknowledge that the fears are real. They may be quite legitimate fears also or maybe they're not and that's not my point, because I think we have to have empathy for them, real, genuine empathy. If you're a school leader right now, I think you have to assume that there are fears all over the place as we come out of the pandemic in a place where we don't have nearly as much trust or community or benefit of the doubt and that the stakes across so, so many issues right now, just feel really big.

We're not even getting into what the emergence of AI and all sorts of other factors that have people questioning their role in society and the future of work and jobs and so forth. I just think people's fear and anxiety just are very high right now and very on edge.

Tavener: Well, I think you're right, Michael, and I actually don't think many people would disagree with that assessment of our society. It feels really present and consistent with what I experience. When I think about my situation, and I'll focus on parents and teachers, it has been at times so confusing to me when they're attacking me. It keeps running through my mind that they actively chose to come to Summit knowing that I was the founder and the leader and having access to a huge public record on what I believe and how we enacted and enable it. So it's so confounding when they're attacking me in the name of fighting what they seem to think Summit is or should be or somehow is losing. I'll admit it gets really hard to not be dismissive or judgmental as I often don't think their accusations or complaints are grounded in fact or reality.

But to your point, that's beside the point because what I hear you saying is they likely have very real fears that they're feeling and not likely. Let's just say they have really real fears that they're feeling and/or some other emotion. If those are rooted at the root of what they're doing, it doesn't matter if from my seat they aren't rational or they're in conflict with each other or don't make sense. Of course, the challenge is that understanding that they might be acting out of fear doesn't mean the behavior's going to stop. And honestly, that is really what I think needs to happen because the current state of hostility is totally unhealthy and unproductive. So it really begs the question of, okay, what could we do with that understanding and is that something that we can work with to bring about a better outcome for everybody?

Horn: Yeah, and that's where I want to go, but just one moment because in hearing you say what you just reflected on, I also think that there are a lot of parents right now who have opted into school communities not because of the mission statement and not because of what a school or leader represents, but maybe for some of the other jobs to be done that cause people to switch schools for their kid, to get their child out of a bad situation or to get their kids back on a path to execute the parents' plan for the child, things that frankly speaking, may clash with the mission of a given school community. But let's go to your question of, what do we do about this? Number one, I think I would recommend what Amanda Ripley calls deep listening. In her book, *High Conflict*, she has this amazing set of stories about how these liberal Jews from New York City spend time with these conservative correctional officers in Michigan.

Rather than judge each other, they listen deeply to each other and they develop much deeper understandings of each other's perspectives and they build much deeper relationships and friendships even. It is not that they always agree, but that they come to understand each other and not see them as the other. They do it through what she calls deep listening or truly empathizing. One of the things that struck me about it was that some of the techniques she uses really mirror a lot of things we do when we do a job to be done interview to try and understand why someone hired a certain product or service or why they switched behavior. It also mirrors a lot of parenting advice from people like Janet Lansbury to Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, whose name I never pronounce correctly, so I apologize, or even the protocol in talking to terrorists in hostage situations that Chris Voss writes about in [Never Split the Difference](#), which is a book about negotiation.

This is a total aside now, but Clay Christensen often said that it turns out that there's probably fewer different theories in the world than people think. A theory just gets developed in one domain and then we think it's different from another theory in a different domain, but they're the same theory. But for all these examples, what deep listening requires is something like this. You sit down with someone and they start telling you something. They're explaining a point of view that they hold or whatever. And rather than argue with them or shut them down or even build on what they're saying, you just try and reflect back what they said in an effort to deeply understand what they just told you. So someone makes a point and after listening hard, you say back to them what they just said to you, but in your own words. You don't try to repeat them verbatim because that's just parroting, but you rephrase it to show that you're really getting it or trying to get it.

Then you ask the question, did I get it right? Did I understand what you mean? And invariably, they'll say no and they'll correct you and then you just keep reflecting until you got it. And now instead of just saying, "Oh, those parents don't get it, how dare they or whatever," or being shocked at how they're attacking you, you're basically disarming those parents by really coming to understand the actual points that they hold, which invariably is going to have way more nuance to them than I think the social media memes or the bullying or whatever else. But also my guess is, and this is a guess at this point, but you'll start to understand what their fears actually are. My guess is that they won't seem nearly as crazy once you dig beneath the surface into them. Now, let's just state the obvious.

This is really, really hard work, but I think if you're a school head right now, it might be work you need to invest in to some extent because I think you need to be searching for these misunderstandings, these little questions that can spiral into these full frenzies and just take you off course, and be leaning in consistently to listen deeply and empathize and not proselytize. I think if you do that over and over again, and you talked about this a couple of years ago on the show about how building a culture, the processes and priorities of the place. It's stuff that you do on a daily basis. That means not just lip service of like, hey, welcome parents back to school this one day of the year, but on an everyday basis of really deep listening.

I think you can start to show the community that you're receptive to them even when you disagree and you're not a place that just acts and says. "You're right," but instead, a place that seeks to really understand these fears, because that's what I really think it is at some level and their points of view.

Tavener: Yeah. Michael, I think what you're describing certainly aligned with the research as you said, but also aligns really well with what we call a clearing protocol that we often use, at least in our leadership group. Now you're provoking me to think about using it outside of that. It was introduced to us by The Conscious Leadership Group. What I mean by clearing protocol is it's a tool we use to structure a conversation between people or groups of people when they have a conflict. Very similar to what you're saying, the idea is that when two people who are in a relationship have a conflict, and let's be clear, you're in a relationship with someone if you're the leader of a school and a parent, like it or not, you're in a relationship, they come together often with the help of

a neutral third party who just helps to facilitate the protocol and the goal is to clear the issue.

I will say that's an important element of this is both parties actually have to want to clear the issue because if you don't really want that, it's not going to work. But the basic steps are very aligned with what you're saying. First thing, both people start by affirming the relationship. I realize that sounds a little revolutionary in this cancel culture time, but just this idea that like, yeah, I actually want to have a good relationship with you. Then the first person starts and they just state facts. It's shocking how hard it can be to state facts, especially in these spaces of fear and anxiety. It's just a lot of stuff around that. So you actually start with facts. This is where the facilitator can be helpful to sort through what's fact and say, "Hey, there's space in a moment for your thoughts," or we call it can be fiction about the situation. The way we like to start this one is, the story I'm telling myself about these facts is...

And it's great. Share the story you're telling yourself. Then there's a statement of ownership because in a relationship, everyone has some ownership, and then a statement of your feelings on the issue. That's really important. Then here's the really important part, a statement of desire or want. What do you actually want to come out of this conversation to be clear? Then that's where we turn to the other person who's really been listening, as you said, and that person, interestingly, just like what you said, validates the facts to ensure clarity. So they will say, for example, I agree that X happened and Y happened and whatever, just validate the facts and then they mirror back the emotions, thoughts, judgment, ownership and wants. They don't have to agree with what the other person is feeling or thinking, but they have to be able to mirror it back to show that they actually heard it. Then just as you said, they have to check. Did I get that right? Was that accurate? Did I leave anything out? Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Once those things get sorted through and everything's on the table, there's a confirmation of, do you feel clear now that you've been able to put everything on the table and truly been heard? I think this is really powerful because people often say, "I don't feel heard." I don't know about you, but I hear this constantly. What does it mean to feel heard? Sometimes I would argue people say, "Well, they don't feel heard until you do what they're telling you they want you to do," but that's not actually being heard. So this is really a protocol to being heard. Then of course, people can switch. I will just say I'm consistently pleasantly surprised about how well it works. As long as both people really do want to resolve the issue and be in a productive relationship, I would say one fail-safe test of being clear, and you said this, is sitting face to face and holding eye contact. In my experience, people who are not clear with each other literally can't hold eye contact. It's like an inability to do that, it's a tell that you're not clear. So one pragmatic thing we use.

Horn: Wow. No, I love the way you just described that protocol that you all have and some of the nuance that lurking in there as well, I just got from that. And I feel heard, I will tell you that, Diane, but I think it's a really good point. I think it may segue into the last thing that was on my mind and maybe the last part of why I suspect that it's fear or anxiety driving so much of this and maybe people's habits, but it comes from this job to be done

lens. I've used the phrase a few times. For those who aren't familiar by this point of the podcast, job to be done is progress someone's seeking in a struggling moment. So you're in a moment of struggle and trying to make progress and we say you have a job to be done and you hire different services or products or solutions to help you make progress. To really make that switch of behavior, we say that there's two factors that are compelling someone to switch.

One is the push of the present like something's not good right now, whatever it might be. Then you have to have a pull, so a new solution, a new vision of what could be that actually moves you beyond where you currently are. But at the same time, there's two forces that basically represent friction against that movement, and one is anxiety, frankly. Anxiety generally manifests itself as all the worries you have about the new thing that you're going to go do. I think so much of this is like, oh, my gosh, they're teaching this or they're trying to implement that, and you start thinking of all the things it's not going to do well or that it's going to screw up that you won't be able to deal with, whatever it might be and that's all anxiety. Then the other force that's holding you back, that's friction, is what we call the habit of the present.

Just like, well, I can stay in the treadmill and just keep doing what I'm doing. My guess is that when a parent community doesn't want to go along with something new, it's not just that there might not be a pull of something new or that the pull might not be compelling. It might be that the pull is too big and that there's a lot of anxiety around it that's holding people back. Look, it also could be maybe the habit is stronger than the pull, but my guess is that it's really anxiety around the new that's driving so much of this. My sense is that a mistake a lot of people make repeatedly when introducing changes, they just jump right in with the new thing they want to do. The problem is that it immediately lights a fire under all those anxieties.

A better way that I've found to do it is to dig into what's not good enough from a common point of view, like a shared vision of what's not good enough about the way things are currently, really lean into the struggle, the pushes, and then you help the community find its way to solutions that pull them in so that you're innovating with your community rather than imposing it on them. The story that I told from reopen to reinvent about this was when Tommy Chang was superintendent of Boston Public Schools and he wanted to switch the times of high school, to move bell times later in line with the research that kids, teens wake up too early because they naturally go to sleep later. He had this great plan that he rolled out and just the community went ballistic. The major anxiety they had was this was going to hurt low-income families.

Well, the district had mountains of research on how it would actually help low-income families, but they didn't start with all the challenges with current bell times and the schedules and how it screws low-income families and all this stuff. They jumped in with a solution, and once that was there, it was like you couldn't put the cat back in the bag of the anxieties, Diane. They gave so much data and facts and research, it was too late. Bell times didn't budge and I think it led to his ouster ultimately as superintendent there, although Boston's not an easy place to lead in general. But I guess a better process in my mind would've started with the shared struggle and then would've moved



to the pull, if you will, because the moment you jump there, the anxiety is really, really jump out and you're in this position of having to figure out what's really going on here.

Tavener: Michael, what you're speaking to me is some of the wisdom of really being thoughtful about change management. There's a lot of folks, certainly Kotter is a guru here and someone that we've studied and worked with and followed for a number of years, but this idea of leading with a vision and there's all these steps, building a guiding coalition who actually understands the research and comes along with you and then have small wins and things like that. One of the things I'm reflecting on is over the last four years, there have been so many changes in schools, so many changes that were thrust upon us, but at some level, the school leader seems like the person responsible for putting those changes on people even if they didn't really want them themselves. So this idea that really being mindful of the process of change and how we engage people is really critical to potentially avoid some of these issues that we're talking about.

Then the other thing that you're bringing up for me, and maybe this is where we'll leave it today, is just this idea that we have a mantra of I have work to do, you have work to do, we have work to do together. No human is exempt from having to do their own work. One of the practices that has been really helpful and you started at the top by asking me how do I feel, and this is a place that I've had to really improve my skill, to be honest with you. There is this concept of emotional granularity, which is our ability to access language to describe our emotions, and to be even aware of and in touch with our emotions, and then put words to them in a much broader spectrum than sad, mad, whatever it might be. So we as a team have been using the How We Feel app to build ourselves in this area. There's the emotion wheels and journaling as tools.

We use another tool above and below the line, but the point being here in community for ourselves and then in community, we really are getting in touch with our emotions because I think some of this anxiety and fear you're talking about, people don't even know what's going on for them. They're not paying attention to or tuned into it, and so they're reacting to emotions that they're not even sitting in or exploring or even able to describe. Certainly, that's an experience that I'm reflecting on of when people come at you and I'm observing, "You're angry," and they're like, "I'm not angry." I was like, okay. Then vice versa. What's my emotion in engaging them and how am I being thoughtful about that? Because we can't control other people, we can only control ourselves. So I would just say maybe that's a really interesting or weird way to wrap the season, but understanding our own selves and just being able to share how we feel in ways, I think that that's the beginning step to maybe bridging some of these divides and actually getting into spaces where we can listen to each other.

Horn: Yeah. Well, and we've had a whole season right on helping people start a process of innovation and/or continuous improvement in piloting. That's going to raise some anxieties and fears, and so you're going to have to do what you just said, is recognize where each person is on that spectrum. I think that's a really good place to leave it, Diane.

Tavener: Well, before we head out for the summer, I do want to hear what you've been reading, listening to, or watching one more time.

Horn: Yeah, one more time. Roll it back. I just finished Ryan Craig, who's a education guy, runs a private equity firm, the education space. It's not coming out until November, so hopefully he's not going to get upset at me for talking about it right now, but it's about apprenticeships. It's called Apprenticeship Nation. I loved it because I learned a lot about this burgeoning sector that is arising as an answer to the, if not college for all question that you and I have talked about on the show quite a few times. It's an area I have followed, but I don't know a lot about, and I felt like I really got a good course in it. What about you?

Tavenner: Oh, well I can't wait to read that one. I think I might shock you with this one. I don't know. I'm going to go forward into the summer because we're not going to be together to talk about this and I don't want to miss the chance to share. As you may have heard, this is a summer of blockbuster movies with a lineup of films people literally can't wait to see. But for me, the one I'm truly excited about, Michael, is Barbie. You might be wondering why. I see your face.

Horn: Yes, I am.

Tavenner: Let me share my top three reasons. First of all, this might be a weird vision for you, but I had Barbies as a young girl, and in that timeframe, they were the totally unhealthy version of Barbie. But today, Michael, Barbie is president and a scientist and an astronaut and all sorts of amazing things that come in all different shapes and sizes. I just love the conscious progress we are making as a society and want to acknowledge it and celebrate it well-knowing that we still have a long way to go, but still progress, not perfection. The second is I'm really fascinated by how excited young people are for this movie, and it makes me really curious about why. I'm just excited to be in conversation with them about it, and so that's fun. Then I like the idea of a blockbuster movie that isn't about battles and weapons and superheroes and wars, but rather is about a woman on a journey to find herself. I can't wait to see Barbie.

Horn: Well, you are right. I did not expect you to go there, but now I'm intrigued, whereas before, I confess, I would've written this off as just one more part of a franchise that we haven't been super excited about in my house historically, but I'm going to take a page from Adam Grant and rethink all of that, so thank you. As we sign off from the season of Class Disrupted, first, congratulations once again, Diane, and thank you for letting me and all of us learn from you. And to all our listeners, thank you for joining us as always on this episode and for the season of Class Disrupted. Stay tuned because we're pretty certain we're coming back for a fifth season in the fall. We will say our goodbyes, but only for now. We'll see you next time.