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Recorded Message: The Hennessy Report from Keystone Partners. A free flowing conversation with leaders in the HR community talking about themselves, the industry, and their work. Brought to you in cooperation with NEHRA, the Northeast Human Resources Association.

Dave Hennessy: Welcome to The Hennessy Report. I'm Dave Hennessy. Today's guest, the first of 2020, is Siobhan McHale of the DuluxGroup in Melbourne, Australia. Siobhan heads up People, Culture and Change at Dulux and before that she headed up the function at ANZ or as she calls it ANZ, the largest bank in Australia and she helped transform that organization, one of the worst performers in Australia, to one of the best performing banks in the world. She's also the author of a new book, *The Insider's Guide to Culture Change*, February 2020. Siobhan will have some giveaways coming up and you can look on her LinkedIn. In fact, I met Siobhan through LinkedIn following her articles and posts that were really provocative and interesting. She wrote a very fascinating piece, *Does Fear Drive Performance*, which was the title and actually led to our podcast interview with Patty McCord of Netflix fame, who she referenced in that article.

Next up on our podcast is the VP of People at Drift, Dena Upton. They're a conversation marketing company that's growing very fast and you'll want to hear all about them. And now our conversation with Siobhan McHale.

Siobhan, welcome to the podcast.

Siobhan McHale: Thank you so much David. It's great to speak with you.

Dave: Same here. I've been following you for over a year now and I guess we should talk about how we got to know each other. You posted an article, a very provocative article with a provocative picture, *Does Fear Drive Performance*. And it had some rowers in a boat with sharks circling around them and in the article you wrote a lot about in particular the Netflix "keeper test," which asked managers to say, "Would you hire this person that's doing this role right now? If you wouldn't, should they be here at all, should we make the move now and get the person in here that should be doing this work?" And you tested it in your article and I think it was a little tongue in cheek the way you wrote the article, but you really got a lot of people thinking. It got a tremendous amount of buzz on LinkedIn. Why don't you just talk a little bit about how you came to write that article? Because now you've written a book as well, and were you surprised by the reaction you got from it on LinkedIn?

Siobhan: Yeah, that's a great question. And so one of the things I've been doing in terms my role on LinkedIn is to promote conversations. So really engage people in a conversation about workplace culture and maybe test some of the assumptions that we have about culture. And I think one of those assumptions in parts may be that culture is a one size fits all. And actually culture is always dependent on the strategy and what enables strategy and the meaning making that's given to events and experiences in that particular context or workplace. So in one context, what Netflix does may be very fearful, but in another context in Netflix, the roles and the rules of engagement are really clear. They're looking for stars and they are looking for people who can outperform and that expectation is made really clear from the outset. So yeah, I like to provoke conversation and thoughtful debate on LinkedIn.



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Dave: One of the things that I really appreciate and I've learned from you on LinkedIn is that when somebody comments on something that you've posted or written, you very regularly respond to them and add to that discussion. I just think it's a great practice. You have great LinkedIn manners if that's the way to describe it, but I've learned from your approach and I appreciate it. I think others have too. I noticed that you have quite a world following with your writing. It's impressive.

Siobhan: Thank you, Dave.

Dave: Having had a preview of your new book, *The Insider's Guide to Cultural Change*, I think I might know where you go with this, but we usually ask our podcast guests, as you look back now on your career journey, was there an inflection point that you look back on as something that was a defining moment? Maybe you didn't think about it then as something that set you on this path, but as you look back on it now, that experience guided what you've become so far in your career?

Siobhan: Yeah, great question, David. There are a number of them. I think one that springs to mind is I had spent about 10 years as a consultant, as management consultant based in London at PricewaterhouseCoopers, flying in and out of organizations, advising leaders about how to do change and culture change in particular. And after a decade as a consultant, I was standing in a taxi rank at an airport in the States, when I had this epiphany that I actually wanted to move out of consulting and into an organization as an insider. So rather than being an outsider, I wanted to roll up my sleeves and actually do culture change, actually put into practice all the advice and the tools that I've been telling line managers about. So at that stage I did a U-turn and I joined a series of large and multinational organizations as the executive in charge of transformational change. That was one of the key pivot points for me in my career because I think being an external person or an advisor gave me a unique perspective on workplaces but being an insider gave me a different perspective, again. How you stand side by side with leaders every day to transform workplace cultures.

Dave: What surprised you about the difference between being a consultant and advisor to being in the trenches? I imagine there were things that looked easier from the outside.

Siobhan: I think one of the first things is the amount of pressure that leaders are under to deliver the results and to look for fast solutions. As an external consultant I would say, "Well, let's take our time. Let's really diagnose the issues." But when you're a line manager, you're under pressure, "Let's move quickly towards the solution. Let's take decisive action." And often that bias for action was leading line managers down the wrong track. They were actually implementing the wrong solutions and often they were putting in technical solutions to adaptive complex culture problems and the solutions were becoming their problems.

For example, in a construction company they were trying to improve safety and they decided, "Well, let's write some policies and procedures so the people out there on the contracts know that they have to be safe and they have to act differently." So they wrote over 5,000 policies on safety and nobody was reading them and their solution actually became their problem. Two years down the track, the central



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team is still writing these hundreds of policies. And so what became apparent to me was this bias for action and this move to put in solutions can often become a problem for line managers.

Dave: Right. All that information became no information. Right?

Siobhan: Exactly, overload.

Dave: What was the driver for you? You said you had that epiphany. What was it that was drawing you inside?

Siobhan: I think I was seeing that I was skating over the top of the issues. I was flying in and out and not really getting to implement. Often I ran workshops, I advise leaders, I coach them, but I wasn't there in the trenches with them. And I really wanted that next level of involvement, being responsible, being co-accountable for culture change and really testing what works and what doesn't work. Because I realized when I flew back often to these clients they were struggling and I was like, well the theories aren't really working as well as maybe we think they're working. Because I think most people advising us and writing about culture change are outsiders. Of course, that's an incredibly valuable perspective, but when you think about some of the great books on culture change, they're written by academics, by journalists, and by management consultants and there are fewer voices from the inside. The insiders I think also need to step up and say, "I've tested this theory or I've tried this practice and this is what seems to accelerate change on the inside."

Dave: Well, you've been in charge of change at a number of large organizations and I understand the change initiatives at ANZ Bank transformed the company and became a case at Harvard University. Close to where we're sitting here today. Can you tell us about what happened at ANZ Bank?

Siobhan: Yeah, sure. When I joined in the early 2000s, the ANZed we call it in Australia, but ANZee is what it's called in America, ANZ Bank. When I first joined in the early 2000s, ANZ Bank was the worst performing big bank in the country and it had fundamentally lost the trust of its customers and the community in general by having a lack of transparency on fees and also closing rural branches, which were like the life blood of rural communities in Australia. A new CEO was appointed called John Macfarlane and he had the challenge of turning the company around. Within seven years he had done that, and he had transformed the company from the lowest performing to the highest performing bank in the country. Profits had almost tripled, the share price had doubled, it went from the lowest customer satisfaction in the country to the highest customer satisfaction and also very high levels of employee engagement.

Dave: What were some of the cultural changes that you made there that enabled this? I mean, one of the things that I read in your book is that there was a big difference between what was going on and what it looked like at the executive suite and at corporate headquarters compared to the branch offices. In fact, you said some of those branch offices looked like the offices of Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. So how did you all tackle this problem to make that big change?



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Siobhan: I think there were a number of key things. The first was identifying the deeply embedded pattern of relating that existed between head office and the branches. So the patterns or agreements, there are often hidden agreements in organizations, but the pattern or agreement in the ANZ that was unspoken was that head office was in role of order giver and the branches were in role of order taker. And there was an agreement between them that they blamed each other for poor customer service. So this pattern of blame was going around and round where head office would say, "Well, it's your fault that we've got poor customer satisfaction." And the branches would then blame the head office, "Well, it's your fault because you're not getting back to us. You're not really responsive in terms of decision making."

One of the first things that we did was implement a project called "restoring customer faith," which restructured and introduced a new business model into the organization. Where we reframed the role of head office staff to be service providers to the branches and we reframed the role of the branches to be service providers to the customers. So then the head office staff were enabling the branches to give better service to customers. That was one of the first things, to really change the whole operating model at the bank and to reframe the roles.

The second thing was a new value that became a clarion call to the 32,000 employees and that was that we lead and inspire each other. So everybody within the bank was invited to step into their leadership role to lead and inspire each other, not to wait for leadership from the top.

And then the third thing we did in order to enable staff to step out of the victim role and step more into a leadership role was to put 32,000 employees through a program called "breakout," that helped them to see the pattern and to step into their leadership role.

Dave: I imagine when you first started to unveil some of these new operating systems and approaches to culture and the organizational structure, there was probably some people that wondered if it was real, if it was going to stay that way. There must've been some cynicism I imagine. How did you get people through that so that they realize this is the new way we're going to work together in a new culture?

Siobhan: It's such a great point. It goes to the heart of one of the critical ingredients of success in culture change, which is getting to critical mass within about 18 months of embarking on change. Because otherwise if you don't get to critical mass, people start to get cynical, "Oh, this is just another change. It's not making any difference."

One of the things we did at the ANZ to get to that tipping point or that critical mass was to have what I call a leader led approach. So the first people who went on the "breakout" program, which was a three-day program to reframe roles and to give people the skills to change, were the leaders. So we put the top 600 leaders through the change program first, and then the program became leader led because otherwise you abrogate responsibility. Leaders must step into their role to lead the culture change in their part of the business. It's not HR's role to do this, which is one of the big myths during culture



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change. Is that it's HR's responsibility to change the culture. At ANZ we put line managers into the role and we gave them the tools to take up that role right from the start.

Dave: I imagine that you must have shifted performance incentives to reflect that as well. Can you share how you handled that?

Siobhan: Yeah, correct. I think one of the key ingredients in successful culture change is to align your processes and systems to the designed culture and that's definitely one of the things that we did at ANZ. We looked at the whole performance score card if you like, and we aligned that to meeting the needs of our multiple stakeholders. I think at ANZ we were very good in prior years at meeting the needs of our shareholders, so we had a balanced scorecard where we looked at metrics in terms of shareholders, customers, employees, and the community and people got measured and rewarded based on multiple stakeholders, not just on one or two stakeholders.

Dave: Siobhan, as you look back on it now, is there any incident or something that happened that was something you say, "Oh, that's when I knew this was working. We were really getting the result we wanted. The culture is shifting."

Siobhan: Yes. It's such a great question. One of the things that stood out for me was that in Australia at the time, banks were beginning to get ready for digital banking and they were closing down a lot of their branches, particularly in rural areas. This was causing people a lot of angst because they were relying on their community banks a lot in the age before digital banking. But our competitor bank announced that it was getting rid of 53 of its rural branches and our CEO, John Macfarlane, made the announcement that we at ANZ would buy those 53 branches. It just sent a huge groundswell, not just in the media externally, but within the bank itself with our employees who had heard that Macfarlane was going to actually put his money where his mouth was and really make a commitment to not closing any more rural branches.

This just went round like wildfire and it brought us to critical mass on the journey because the cynics and the skeptics became believers. They thought, "Well, this is a CEO who sticks to his word. This is a change I can believe in and this is an initiative that I actually want to get on board with now." So it was an announcement that created this sense of energy and momentum within the organization and caused us to get to critical mass.

Dave: That's great. Well, we're talking about culture, your book's about culture, your work inside organizations and as a consultant is about culture. How would you define culture?

Siobhan: Yes. I often say that culture is one of the most talked about but poorly understood terms in workplaces today. I think many people when they think about culture, they think about the values and behaviors at an individual level. Whereas I say culture is systemic and culture is about the patterns of relating at the collective level that govern how the organization functions. So you can walk into a culture and it can capture you almost as soon as you walk into the workplace. These patterns are collective,



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they are co-created. So they are about the agreements between the parts and they are often very difficult to detect.

Dave: Well, in your book you write about the big myths about workplace culture. Can you tell us a little bit about what those myths are or what the big myth is?

Siobhan: Great question. There are multiple myths, but one of the common myths that I've encountered, David, is that a lot of managers and leaders have been taught that if they design and articulate the values and behaviors that they expect, then employees will align their behaviors to these value statements. And that of course as we know is nonsense, but we seem to educate leaders that that's how you do culture change. Whereas in fact, leaders must learn to firstly see these deeply embedded patterns, and I can give you some examples of patterns, and learn how to break those patterns. That is the crucial thing.

Dave: I would love to hear that. Can you give us an example that you've seen inside an organization, or a consultant, a pattern that needed breaking and how you did it?

Siobhan: Sure. Patterns show up in nature, so they show up in something as simple as a snowflake or a face of a sunflower or even the undulating sands in the Sahara Desert. All of these natural ecosystems have patterns that are governed by rules. And if we understand the rules, then we can understand and see the pattern more clearly. For example, Edward Lorenz, the scientist and mathematician talked about the butterfly effect, which is that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil can eventually produce a tornado in Texas. So these seemingly chaotic natural systems are actually governed by underpinning rules.

Dave: Any examples from inside companies from your book's title, an *Insider's Guide*?

Siobhan: One of the examples was a construction or infrastructure firm where the CEO, let's call him Ben, was trying to create a higher performing and commercial culture, but most of his contracts were running in the red and managers were over spending and they just weren't meeting their budgets and shareholders were really starting to get very vocal about this. Ben was under a lot of pressure to create a much more high performing organization and to increase the margins on these construction contracts. The way he was trying to do this was by sending managers on finance training courses and putting in a new financial management system. But actually what he had failed to see was the deeply embedded pattern that was running the company.

Essentially, the company founders had shipped entire families to the US in the '50s in order to resource their growing number of projects. And these families who had come to the US and started working in the company, started to develop an assumption that our relationships with each other help us to survive and thrive, which was very true, but that starts to become a dysfunctional family where the relationships became more important than performance. So an agreement developed between managers, line managers and employees that our relationships with each other are more important than performing on our contracts and delivering to our shareholders. This assumption or pattern started to prevent them from giving feedback to each other. And as soon as Ben joined the organization, he got



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caught by that pattern and he stepped into the role of Mr. Nice Guy and wasn't giving the constructive performance feedback to his line managers. And once he saw that pattern or agreement that we value our relationships more than we value performance, he could start to shift the pattern and step into a different role, which he did and within two years his contracts were showing increased margins.

Dave: That's great. Any other pitfalls that leaders encounter when they're trying to make these changes of the culture?

Siobhan: One of the key ones is really moving too quickly at the beginning, not really diagnosing these patterns and putting in, a bit like Ben did, putting in process and system changes. Like sending managers on skills training courses is a classic one. Not really identifying the pattern and how the leaders are co-creating the pattern because the pattern is getting fueled from somewhere. It doesn't sit in isolation. It's always getting fueled by some other part of the system of the organization. So how can you spend the time to identify these patterns rather than moving to process or system solutions like Ben did. He implemented a finance management system. He sent all his managers in finance training courses, but they still came back into the same organization with the same pattern and got caught by that almost immediately. So nothing changed.

Dave: New ideas isn't going to change the culture. You have to change the system and the patterns.

Siobhan: Yeah. You've got to change the system, exactly. And you've got to change the role that people are taking off and their mental map of their role as well. So often these deeply held assumptions and the mental maps don't change. Your mental map is like your GPS and sometimes your GPS can be out of date and you can end up in the wrong place, down the wrong track, on the wrong road because the GPS is telling you to go in the wrong direction. And during culture change you often need to update your GPS in order to download the latest information on where you expect people to go to.

Dave: Siobhan, is the culture ever set or is culture always under assault? Always evolving, always changing.

Siobhan: I think in these VUCA times we are facing into volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity. It's hard for a culture to remain fixed and, in my view, leaders need to be constantly stepping back onto the balcony and seeing what's on the horizon, what's happening in the marketplace, what's happening internally within the workplace and adjusting the culture in order to meet those needs. Now some of the cultural tenants may not need to change. You may say integrity, that's just fundamental and customer focused. That's just fundamental, but there may be some things that you need to dial up. For example, you might want to become more growth oriented in your culture or you might want to at times become more commercial. You might want to become more agile. From my view, it's never a set and forget. You constantly have to be reviewing your culture like any other part of your system. You would review and say, is it still healthy? Does it need to adjust and how can we adjust more quickly?

I think there is this view that culture is very hard to change and it takes a long time. In my experience, that's not necessarily the case.



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Dave: Really?

Siobhan: Not necessarily because I think in a small organization or team you can achieve an enormous amount within a year if you reframe the roles. And so again, role reframing can lead to much faster change.

Dave: Siobhan, tell us a little bit about what you do now at a DuluxGroup?

Siobhan: I'm the Executive General Manager, People, Culture and Change, which is essentially the head of Human Resources. I've been here for four years and one of the reasons always employed was for my change background and in particular culture change. So the role is not to run HR in a business as usual way, but more to help the executive team and to help the company to grow and think beyond where it is currently and in fact to create that growth agenda. And four years later, we've actually been acquired by a Japanese company, the fourth largest paint company in the world called Nippon Paint Holdings, who saw that growth culture and decided to buy us with the highest price ever paid for a paint company in recent times. So they bought us for our capability and for our culture and we're just going through that merger now, which has happened in August. So very exciting times for us at DuluxGroup here in Australia.

Dave: Can you tell us a little bit about the culture that you've helped create and evolve at the DuluxGroup?

Siobhan: Yeah. One of the reasons I joined was that this company has a really vibrant culture and it's got that great combination. Often I get called into companies that are not... they're dysfunctional in some ways, but DuluxGroup is a culture that is friendly and high performing. So it's got an emphasis on having great relationships with each other but also being achievement-oriented. I think our challenge was how do we take that and start to take our great products that consumers in Australia and New Zealand and parts of Asia really love and how do we take those products into an international audience. Our recent integration with Nippon Paints gives us that pathway to take our products now particularly into Asia and also the possibility of taking them into other Western markets. So yeah, it's an exciting time for us at DuluxGroup in terms of our opportunities for growth and the opportunities that that presents to our people.

Dave: Siobhan, you've lived and worked in so many countries. How would you compare the way business is done in different regions of the world, especially related to culture?

Siobhan: Yeah, I think there are subtle differences. And this is a generalization, but if you sort of bear with me, but the leader in America is expected to be the leader and expected to give the instructions and take up that leadership role. The meaning of leadership is not the same in all parts of the world. For example, when I came to Australia, the meaning that people gave to leadership is not to give instructions. The leader is to consult with everybody and to really get that sense of, "Where is the system at and how can I consult and emerge the solution from the group, not tell the group what to do." So leadership meaning-making here in Australia is very different. If you take up your role in that more



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directive way that maybe is the meaning of leadership in America, you will get a lot of push back in Australia.

And then again, the subtleties when you go into Asia is not about being direct. In Australia you say what you think and it's very direct and anybody can say what they want. In Asia there is this sort of losing face. Many people would say what they want, but actually you can't really do that in that particular system because you have to be conscious of not losing face. Particularly if you're a leader, you don't disagree with a leader in public. I was working on one consulting assignment in Asia where an English consultant got sent home because he disagreed with the Asian client in front of people at a dinner, and that just was not acceptable to openly confront or disagree with the most senior person at the table. Those are some of the subtleties that you've got to learn about before you go into different cultures. What's going to work? What's the meaning-making given to different roles in this culture?

Dave: The way the business community is evolving, it seems like the Australian definition of leadership is much more progressive in the way effective organizations are being led. Would you agree with that?

Siobhan: I think it depends on context, doesn't it? Because if people expect that that's what a leader does, they come in and they tell you what to do and then a leader comes in and starts asking you what do you think you could be seen to be a weak leader. But I do think ultimately that style of leadership or that role of leader tends to get less resistance down the track because you consult to get people's views, you understand where everybody's coming from, and that can tend to speed up change down the track. The negative to it though is that there is a tendency maybe not to make decisions and not to be decisive. You want to get consensus and sometimes that's not always possible. So I think it's a combined approach where you can solve, but ultimately you have to make a decision as a leader that is your role. Even if it disappoints some people, you have to make the best decision for the whole system.

Dave: There's pros and cons to each style. I guess you have to know what kind of organizational culture and national culture you're working in so that you can adapt and recognize the strengths and weaknesses of each leadership style.

Siobhan: Absolutely.

Dave: We do produce this podcast with the local SHRM chapter in the Boston area and we have the emerging HR professionals question of the podcast. The producer of The Hennessy Report, Meghan Mandino, is here to ask you.

Siobhan: Great. Hi Meghan.

Meghan Mandino: Hello. I saw that you had worked with the Sheffield United Football Club to research high performance in teams when you were at the University of Sheffield.

Siobhan: Correct.



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Meghan: Many of our guests relate past team experiences they've had with how they manage their HR teams today. And, we were wondering what your findings were through your research and whether you found that they've held up over the years throughout your career.

Siobhan: I did my master's research on the Sheffield United Football Club as you mentioned, and one of the things I realized, I spent months and months analyzing them; and going to their football games and going to their debriefing sessions; and even turning up at an army training boot camp with them for three days. And with all of this data, what I did realize was that it wasn't the individual players that were the most important. They obviously had stars in the team, but it was more the culture that they created within the club that allowed the team to succeed year after year, after year. And that culture was the attitude of the players that they engendered. It was the processes and systems that they put in place to eke out performance gains at every single match and every single training session. So it wasn't just the star players, it was more this culture of performance and this incremental improvements that I think made the difference and that was enduring. Players could come and go, but the culture was what sustained it and allow that club to thrive.

Dave: We have a couple lighter questions to wrap up our podcast here, Siobhan. One we ask every single guest is if you could write a letter of advice to Siobhan McHale of 30 years old, what would you write?

Siobhan: Be yourself and go for the things that you really want to go for. Don't be afraid to step into, lean into your courage and lean into your leadership. One of the things I really enjoy now and sometimes I wish I'd started earlier was being an educator. Really educating people about what I know and I probably would say just lean into that and don't be afraid.

Dave: Excellent. If you could go to dinner with anyone, who would it be and why?

Siobhan: I would probably go to dinner with my parents. My mum passed away in 2001 and my dad passed away about three years ago, and I'd probably have dinner with them and ask them all the questions that I didn't get to ask them when they were alive. And then I'd probably invite Whitney Houston. She could sing for us.

Dave: Now that you're an author, I think this is your first book, *The Insider's Guide to Culture Change*. What's a book that changed your life?

Siobhan: I think a book that influenced me a lot... I mean, I read a lot and there are fiction books, but one with the great influences in my life and particularly in my career was Carolyn Taylor's book, *Walking the Talk*, which came out in 2005. That was the first book that I'd read that was very practical about workplace culture and it became my Bible. It was really for me, one of those books that you think, "Wow, it's so great to have a roadmap to help guide you along this complex adaptive journey of culture change." And that really was one of the great motivators for me in writing my book, *The Insider's Guide to Culture Change*, because I realized how helpful tool kit could be to practitioners who are trying to create better workplaces.



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Dave: I have one last question for you. What advice would you give to people in this people function that want to aspire to do the kind of work you've done in your career, cultural change?

Siobhan: I think one of the things for HR practitioners is to step into their dual role. The first role you have is to run HR, but the second role you have, the key role in my view is to help the organization to change and to adapt and to grow. And I think HR practitioners are very good at running HR, the bread and butter of HR that we've always been good at and the technical aspects of HR, but I think we've got to now step more into our change role because leaders are asking us for change advice and they're looking for more than just engagement advice. We can't just keep going in saying, "Oh, it's all about engagement and here's some engagement survey and engagement tool." Because our leaders want advice on, "How can I create an agile culture, a more commercial culture, higher performing, sustainable..." It might be collaborative culture.

There are so many different cultures that they're asking for advice on and we need to have the toolkit to take up that role I think, much more powerfully. That's one of my passions. How do you create workplaces that can deliver, grow, and adapt, not just about employee engagement, which of course is important, but it's only part of the solution.

Dave: That's good advice. It's been great to get to know you through social media, the power of LinkedIn. It's amazing how the world is getting smaller. We can learn from people that are so much further away from us geographically, and it's great to get to know you and collaborate with you. So much fun. When's the book officially come out?

Siobhan: Yeah, 11th of February. I'm going to be having some giveaways because I'm producing a summary of its content for those people who are keen and that'll be available in January.

Dave: Well, great Siobhan.

Siobhan: Thank you so much, David. Again, really appreciate it.

Dave: Thanks for making the time. Really enjoyed it.

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