Ryan Jenkins
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And now taking care of business your hosts Craig Moen and Shye Gilad.

[00:08] Craig: Welcome to Business Owners Radio episode 212. Our guest today is Ryan Jenkins, internationally recognized keynote speaker, virtual trainer, and Wall Street Journal Best Selling Author of his new book *Connectable: How Leaders Can Move Teams from Isolated to All In*. With over 300 articles, Ryan is active columnist for Inc. and Entrepreneur Magazine. He is laser-focused on leadership, generational differences, workplace loneliness, and the future of work. Good morning, Ryan, welcome to business owners radio.

[00:44] Ryan: Thanks for having me, looking forward to this conversation.

[00:46] Craig: We've been looking forward to this because you've been on the circuit. You've got amazing audiences throughout the world. And we really want to dive in and share this with our audience because the content is so current and relevant right now. And before we dive into what you're doing with the current activities on your book, let's go backwards a little of time. How did the work you're doing right now evolved where you are today?

[01:10] Ryan: Yes. I've spent over a decade as a keynote speaker and consultant, and most of my expertise has been in generational differences. I've been helping audiences understand the emerging generation specifically and how they can best attract, lead, engage the next generation workforce. My last book was all about Generation Z, which was the youngest generation entering the workforce right now. And it was in writing that book that I discovered that they are the loneliest generation. I mean, they had been wrestling with loneliness at alarming rates. I found that extremely troubling, and I thought to myself, what can I do to help them and it led me down a path of trying to figure out why this was occurring for this generation. So that kicked off my interest in loneliness. And the more I dug into it, the more I just found it so fascinating. This was all pre pandemic.

So then the pandemic happened, and I brought all my loneliness research to my clients just wondering if they would be open to talking about this, because humans have never wanted to talk about loneliness. So I thought, well, let's just test the waters and see how this goes. And I was floored by the appetite, everyone wanted to talk about it, even clients that would come to me and say, "Hey, let's talk about Gen Z." I'd say, "Yeah, sure. Also, I'm working on this other book about human connection and loneliness at work." And they thought, "That's what we want."

I've just been floored by the appetite and so then that really took the research into hyper drive. And now we've surveyed over 2,000 global workers. We work with 50 leaders specifically about what they're doing to lessen loneliness and create more belonging at work. And then now we've taken this work to hundreds of organizations all around the globe. And so we put it all in the book, and it was just recently released, and we were lucky enough for it to hit the Wall Street Journal bestseller list. So it is clear that the market is ready to talk about this and I couldn't be more happy to start broaching the topic of workplace loneliness with your audience and folks all around the world. So that's kind of the Genesis story of the book and this research.

[03:06] Craig: And congratulations on the Wall Street Journal level, not many achieve that. The content has to be good to make at that level. Tell us, from your standpoint, dealing with the research you've done, when we hit the cliff, if you will, what did that feel like as far as the evolving generations and the COVID starting, and how did this evolve and generate and where are we now?

[03:32] Ryan: Yes. Loneliness had been increasing before the pandemic. It escalated during the pandemic for obvious reasons. And it still remains relatively high, and it'll continue to rise or it'll plateau if we don't take intentional effort. **But loneliness growing means that it's malleable, and that means it can also decrease and there's very intentional and small pro-social behaviors that we can all do to help lessen loneliness in ourselves and those around us. So that's the hope, that's the encouraging part of all this.** So yeah, it's increasing but also it can decrease. It's just something that, again, it's been shrouded in shame for so long, and the message that we'd like to bring to audiences that it's not shameful, it's actually just simply a signal. It's a signal that we belong together, it's akin to hunger. If you have the experience of hunger in oneself, well, that's your signal to go eat something. If you experience loneliness, well, that is your cue to forge a connection. **And at the end of the day, loneliness is useful. It's telling us that we are better together and we need to build connections so that we can remain strong as a team or collectively as a community.** And so that's why this conversation on loneliness I find so fascinating, and one of the biggest flags I like to fly and big impetus of the book is to destigmatize loneliness. We've put in a ton of really interesting and fascinating illustrations in the book to make it much more approachable and accessible for folks, because again, it's been just shrouded in shame for far too long.

And Craig, I guess I should mention too, it probably would be helpful to start with a better definition of loneliness. I think so many folks kind of mislabel loneliness. **Loneliness is not the absence of people, it's the absence of connection.** So I'll say that one more time, it's not the absence of people, it's the absence of connection. Many of our listeners can probably relate that you've probably felt isolated or disconnected at times being in a crowded office space or a coffee shop or an event, and that's because you're lacking not people but connection. And so that's really important.

We expand it even further to really help folks understand that connection has different layers as well, we can be connected with oneself, we can connect to team members or those around us, connect to the work or the organization, connect to meaning or purpose at work, so there's a lot of different elements, think about as we think about loneliness.

And then the last thing I'll say, kind of coming back to your question around kind of where we at and kind of what's been going on, when we research these 2,000 global workers, we ask them, Hey, what's contributing most to your and or others loneliness? The top two responses we got, number one, was technology and social media, and number two is busyness. And so these two things aren't directly related with the pandemic but certainly these two things have escalated over the years. We can all relate that technology is more and more part of our life, and that's a piece of culture that'll continue to accelerate, and busyness, we're just more busy, there's more things to do, it seems like our plates and our to-do list are constantly overflowing. So these are big derailers of connection that we got to keep an eye on. And again, technology is not going to slow down anytime in the near future so we got to be more intentional and arm ourselves with some specific strategies to make sure that we have the right balance of using technology to enrich our lives, but at the same time carving out time for meaningful connection.

[06:53] Shye: Ryan, help us understand what feels a little bit like a paradox here. I mean, we're more connected via technology than we ever have been, yet you describe loneliness as this absence of connection. What's going on there?

[07:07] Ryan: Yeah, great insight and great question. Yeah, it's so true, right? **We are more connected than ever before, but there's a distinction between communication and connection.** So we are communicating now more than ever before, aren't we? We are texting and email and slack and podcasting. We're communicating more than ever before but we're not necessarily connecting. And there's a difference, and it shows up differently in

our brains. There's a difference between communication and connection. I like to think of it as I can text my wife all day, "Hey, thanks for doing this. I love you. Love you, can't wait to see you later. Love you." And the "love you" is me communicating to her. It's not till I am with her and I'm looking at her and she feels my presence that I can say "I love you" then that's a connection. And so there's a very distinct difference there. I think we're all guilty of this. We're communicating now more than ever, and it feels like we're connecting but at the end of the day we're not really connecting. So that's a big piece of it that we have to really kind of unpack and think about.

The other interesting research, Shye, to your question around this paradox of connecting and we seem more connected than ever before, and it's around social media, because of course social media really gives us a sense that we're connected to folks. But according to research, when folks are using social media to replace their actual relationships, their IRL in real life relationships, social media is very detrimental to the mental health of individuals. But high usage social media users who use social media to supplement their relationships, that's when social media can be very beneficial. And so I think that's a clear distinction we need to be thinking to ourselves—**are we using social media as a way of social snacking or we're just snacking enough to keep loneliness just below the surface enough to where it's not chronically impairing us or we can't function in the world? Or are we using social media as a way to supplement the nourishing relationships and conversations that we've had in real life?** So those are two areas that I think we really need to grapple with, because to your point, Shye, you're right. It's true, we are more connected than ever before, but certainly it's not in the way that our body needs.

[09:25] Craig: Ryan, I was, is there a generational difference going on in regards to loneliness? Is it identifiable at different generational levels?

[09:34] Ryan: There are some nuances. And of course, what kicked my research off was that generation Z was experiencing this to a high degree. Again, I think that they're going up in a much different world than any of us else have ever gone through. I mean, think about this, this always makes my hips hurt when I say this, and I'm a millennial. Generation Z has never known a world where Google doesn't exist. They're all younger than Google. So they've never known a world where the world's information hasn't been curated into a blank search box. They've never known a world where a smart device has been outside of arm's reach. So that's fundamentally reshaped their world. This technology is so new to all of us, and we're all trying to figure out how it's impacting us, our physical body, our mental health, all these things. But of course, this emergent generation, they haven't had a say in it, they've just been born into it. And so I think they're really wrestling with how do I balance all this and make sure I'm still cultivating nourishing and healthy social relationships. So that's I think why Gen Z is experiencing it to a higher degree. And they were experiencing it to a higher degree than baby boomers and the GI generations, the folks that were 80-90 years old, which was really eye-opening, because that often tends to be the demographic that experiences more loneliness than the other generations. So all of a sudden, we saw this imbalance and I think that's, again, what caused the alarm bells to go off in my head thinking, if we don't do something -- this is our future, right, we're going to continue to kind of pull away from each other and seek more isolation.

So that's the biggest thing. There's some other variations across the generations. I don't look to spend too much time next, I don't want people to feel like, "Oh, you're of that generation so you must be lonely" or "You're this generation, you're not lonely." At the end of the day, it's a universal human condition and we're all impacted by it. It just so happens that Gen Z is just a little bit more than the rest of us. And according to our research, I probably should have led with this—of those 2,000 global workers, 72% of them said that they experienced loneliness at least monthly, with 55% saying at least weekly. So again, it's something that impacts all of us no matter where you are in the organization, if you're the top of the organization, in the middle, the lower part of

the organization, it's impacting all of us no matter your role, responsibility. And at the end of the day, loneliness is no respecter of persons.

[11:53] **Craig:** I was wondering along those lines, as business owners, we look at our teams and our organizations, and were involved at decision-making, a lot of outside interaction and various meetings and various communications with other industry leaders so our lives are pretty dense. And how do we turn up our antenna to be aware of what's happening in our organizations and how do we identify where the loneliest might be?

[12:19] **Ryan:** I love that word you just use there, dense. That really stood out to me. Again, we all experience it, it's a universal human condition. But there are certain things that we can look for, and I should say that I wrote the book with my co-author, Steven van Cohen, we're business partners, and we wrote the book to start the conversation. So we unpacked the science of loneliness, we give folks an idea of why belonging is so important. And if you're a business owner, it's helpful to tackle this, because if your workforce is lonely, they're actually seven times less likely to be engaged, they're five times more likely to miss work due to stress or illness, and they're twice as often to think about leaving their employer. So this isn't a soft topic, it's certainly a dire one. And it's really important that we create the sense of belonging so that we can see this engagement flourish and we can see folks really lean in and we can really move the needle from a talent retention perspective, which is so important for so many organizations these days. And then we give some strategies in the book too to unpack for folks. So the book is kind of soup to nuts, it'll be really useful for folks that read it. But we also wanted to create all these other resources that could really move the needle for organizations, and one of which is called the Team Connection Assessment. We worked with Harvard University, folks and some researchers out of University of Alabama and the University of Canterbury. It's the first empirically validated assessment that can actually quantify how strong the relationships are amongst a team. And so really excited about that tool, because to your question, Craig, there's now a tool that you can have your team go through that can actually give you some numbers and some benchmarks on how connected a team is. And then it comes with a number of recommendations based on your score of what we can do to create more stronger connections across a team.

And then we've also identified 10 signs that you can look for, for someone that might be disconnecting an organization. I won't go through all 10 here, but I'll give you a few of them. One is a lack of learning and development. So curiosity and a growth mindset are really good indicators of employee engagement. So if someone has limited participation and training, if they have disdain for extra activities, or they're just uninterested in career progression discussions, that could be a subtle signal, folks that are only interested in talking about work, they avoid conversation around hobbies, or they just don't engage in small talk. They deflect any non-work related questions, those can be indicators of folks that are disconnecting and isolating themselves. And then perhaps the one that catches most people by surprise is excessive working. So if someone is spending too much time working as a way to avoid personal responsibilities, this can point to an imbalance in social relationships. So, if they're volunteering for too many projects, or they're piling up their vacation days, or maybe you notice that they're returning emails late at night, these are all subtle indicators that folks could be isolating and becoming more and more lonesome at work.

[15:23] **Craig:** What were some of the ahas? I know you did a lot of studies and so forth, and a lot of your book is based on the results of that. What was most surprising to you?

[15:32] **Ryan:** What was really surprising to me personally, and what we're hearing more and more from leaders and our clients is how little effort it takes to reduce loneliness in oneself or others. In fact, the research shows that it can take as little as 40 seconds. So an interaction where both parties can feel seen and heard, 40 seconds is all it takes to really create what's called a restorative connection. And I'm an introvert, my co-author is an

extrovert, and so it's been fun kind of putting each of our perspectives into the book. I'm probably like many of your listeners, I'm a business owner, I'm very type A highly ambitious, very driven, and I had a bad habit of if I didn't perceive someone, another person or a relationship being a long term relationship, I usually tended to not invest in that connection or relationship. According to the research, that is just false, and that is bad for my wellbeing, that's bad for the other person's wellbeing too, because we're all a source of wellbeing for each other. So the biggest aha for me was that connections don't have to be lasting to be meaningful. And so now I make it a priority, if I'm in the elevator with someone, I mean how much more fleeting of a connection can you have than riding an elevator with someone in a random city? I would tend to just stick to myself and just not engage and now I make it a priority to ask someone, and I specifically use this question—how's your day going? And actually Craig, you started this conversation before we hit record by saying that very question. It's enough of a different question than how are you doing or how's your day, that gets people to stop in their tracks. And so that's kind of in my personal journey what kind of stuck out most for me, and we've been hearing this from leaders that are reading the book that are clients of ours, that are saying, gosh, this is really refreshing because I don't have to create all this culture change. I don't have to convince my team or other leaders in the organization. I can just do things myself and I can start today doing simple pro social behaviors and enacting some of the strategies that we include in the book to really help reduce worker isolation and lessen loneliness.

[17:39] Shye: So I can tell you one thing that really surprised me, Ryan, that I thought was, I don't know, just interesting is you make an argument in the book that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs should be replaced. It's a great model. It's a long-standing model. It's been researched quite a bit. And so it's interesting, I'm wondering what you found there that you thought was a disconnect, and how can that help us?

[18:00] Ryan: Yeah, yeah, we're respectfully pushing against Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. That stands out to a lot of folks, and we wanted to be a little tongue in cheek and a little edgy with that to get people's attention, so I'm glad that stuck out to you as well. So Maslow's hierarchy of needs, I'm sure many listeners remember, it was six needs that Maslow identified the bottom of the pyramid was our physiological needs, and then at the top is self-actualization. But in the middle of that pyramid is where Maslow's put the need of belonging. We thought that that just didn't do justice to how important belonging is to humanity. We looked at this study, the longest study of adult development, which was done by Harvard University. It's gone on for over 80 years, it's still going on today, which by the way is just incredible that a study has gone on this long, because typically studies like this, they run out of money or they run out of staff, personnel, just people move on, retire, whatever it might be. So the fact that this study is still going on is absolutely incredible. They started with 600 folks, it's now over 2,000 people that they've studied very closely. And the definitive answer that this study has produced in what the underlying source of what leads to a long and lasting life, the definitive response that's been advanced or they found was quality relationships. So if that's true, and I think we can all relate, we feel better when we have a strong connection with a loved one or a friend. We just feel better when we have these sound connections. And so for us, we wanted to create a model that put the appropriate emphasis on belonging and so we created a model that looks like a WiFi signal, and at the bottom, the lowest bar is *to live,* which is still our physiological needs. It's food, water, shelter, those are our most urgent needs. Then after that, it's *learn*, and this is by the way, it's called the three L's of life. It's live, learn, because we're always learning, and when we're all infants, we have to learn the language of our tribes that we can communicate our needs. We're constantly learning, that's a really big staple for humans. And then the top bar and the biggest bar in this model of the WiFi icon is to *link*. And so it's this idea of connecting with each other and creating strong connections with others. We wanted to use a model that looks like a WiFi icon, because we're always connecting our devices to networks and other technology. What happens when we connect our technology with other technology or networks? Our devices get stronger, they get more intelligent, they get more useful. Same thing with humans—**if we can strengthen our connection with others, we all become stronger, we become more useful, we become more resilient**. And so we wanted to use that very recognizable icon so that when folks are consistently connecting their devices to WiFi

signals, that it becomes a subtle reminder that we too as humans are also connectable and we need to prioritize that as well. Because, again, our physiological needs, our most urgent, but our most significant need long term is our need for belonging and to link with one another.

[21:11] Shye: Ryan, it's such a great thought, and just want to thank you again for spending time with us today. The book is *Connectable: How Leaders Can Move Teams from Isolated to All In*. And our guest has been Ryan Jenkins, and thank you again for joining the program.

[21:26] Ryan: Thank you so much for having me, love having this conversation. I'd like to end with a quote by Robin Williams that really is motivational and just a great charge for all of us. But before I do that, if folks want to get connected with us and the work that we're doing, you can visit lesslonely.com, that's less lonely.com. You can find the book there, the assessment I mentioned, you can find there, and you can connect with us on social. So we're really active across every social channel including TikTok, where we're giving like really relevant connection tips. And you can find us on social @ryanandsteven, that's @ryanandsteven. And then lastly, we've got a podcast too. Steven and I, my co-author, unpack the research that we put in the book and then we condense it to what is our reaction response for us personally and professionally in this modern age of work. The podcast is The Case for Connection Podcasts, that's The Case for Connection Podcast. So we're easy to find out there, we'd love to connect with folks. If folks have questions or just want to get in touch with us, best spot would be lesslonely.com.

The quote I'd love to leave for folks, and it stopped me in my tracks when I first read it and it stuck with me this whole journey as I've been unpacking connection and loneliness. It's by Robin Williams, the late comedian and the actor, and he said this quote, **"I used to think the worst thing in life was to end up all alone. It's not. The worst thing in life is to end up with people who make you feel all alone." And I think as business owners, as leaders, that is a big responsibility for us. I think a leadership law moving forward as we step into this remote and hybrid work and isolating times that we keep this universal relationship and leadership law in mind and that is to never make someone feel alone especially when you're with them.**

[23:18] Craig: Our guest today has been Ryan Jenkins, internationally recognized keynote speaker, bestselling author on leadership, generational differences, workplace loneliness, and the future of work. You can learn more about Ryan as well as find links to his content, resources, and book all in our show notes at businessownersradio.com.

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