

Craig Moen 0:00

Welcome to Business Owners Radio, episode 201. Today Shye and I have Deborah Roberts on the show. Deborah is the author of "The Relationship Protocol: How to talk, defuse and build healthier relationship". For business owners, excellent communication skills are a must.

Deborah has the extensive credentials, experience, and focus to make a major upgrade to our communications capabilities. So let's get started.

Shye Gilad 0:27

Good morning, Deborah. Welcome to Business Owners Radio.

Debra Roberts 0:30

Good morning, Shye. Good morning, Craig.

Shye Gilad 0:33

Well, we're so excited to have you here today, we've been really enjoying this book, "The Relationship Protocol: How to talk, defuse, and build healthier relationships". And this brings up so many things around business ownership, creating culture, and also just how to be a better communicator in other areas of our life. And first off just curious, what inspired you to write this book?

Debra Roberts 0:56

So I have been a mental health practitioner, and a business consultant for many, many years. And I had a very natural kind of organic way of working with people, teaching them how to resolve conflicts quickly, how to look at their relationships differently, whether it's to business owners or married couple, it's all kind of the same. And I kept getting feedback from clients and consult to us that I was so helpful and things were moving quickly and kept giving them tools. And probably about 20 years into my work. I came home one day, and I said to my husband, you know, I think I'm doing something different. Because it came so naturally to me, I thought everyone was doing what I'm doing and did a lot of due diligence, realize that they weren't and I wrote the book. And it's a practical guide for understanding what you need to have good interactions, a good relationship, and it gives you the how-to tools for actually having those kinds of conversations.

Shye Gilad 2:00

In your experience. Deborah, what is the story with why humans struggle so hard with communication? It seems like such a fundamental thing. It's one of the first things we experience right from our birth, learning how to communicate in verbal and nonverbal ways. Why do we continue to struggle with this as we grow and develop?

Debra Roberts 2:19

What's so interesting about that question is, we all communicate, we learn how to say words, put sentences together, we learned how to be persuasive sometimes. But in general, unless you had someone in your home life growing up, that modeled good communication for you, most people didn't really learn how to be effective communicators. And so to your point, it is a

fundamental need that we all have. And that changes our lives when we know how to communicate because to be able to express what you need to say, it is a wonderful thing to be able to do. Most people were not taught, they don't teach it in school, they didn't learn it at home. And when I realized that, to be honest, I'm almost more on a mission now. Because it's simply not as complicated as it feels. A lot of the times where people struggle is they don't know what to say they don't know how to start the conversation. They're afraid they're going to hurt someone's feelings, or what if I started, and then I don't know what to do, because it's not going well. So those are the three particular areas where most people avoid conversations, or they just jump in and say, oh, you know, I didn't do that very well.

Shye Gilad 3:34

Yeah. And that really shows up when you're in a leadership position, doesn't it?

Debra Roberts 3:38

Totally does. I know of so many stories. I just heard of a story recently of a board of directors who decided to not tell their shareholders that they were changing the direction of a product that they were building because it wasn't working properly. But they knew they were going to get flack from them. And they didn't want to deal with it. They didn't really know how to say it. So they said nothing. I mean, it's ridiculous. That's at the top level. But between management and teams and employees, you want people to be able to express what they need to say and give you feedback and have conversations.

Shye Gilad 4:15

And you know, as a business owner, I feel like the pressure is on us more than ever, right? Because let's face it, most of us, as you've said, most people we haven't had formal training. It's unfortunately under-educated even in higher ed, let alone in grade school underemphasized but we hear employers that talk about this again and again how communication is so important. And boy, as a business owner, you're just in the crosshairs because the speed that information transfers today, doesn't really give you a lot of leeway if you're not ready to respond, and you're not able to communicate effectively and rapidly because you're yielding that conversation and that messaging to the big void of the inner

Debra Roberts 5:00

That's very true. And there is a presumption that people do know how to communicate. And then they're in situations where they're in over their head. And they don't know what to do, and they feel that they should know what to do. I'm here saying, I understand why you don't know what to do. No one taught you how to deal with that challenging person or the person who's not responding the way that you need them to. Or you said something and you regret that you said it, what do you do now, we all need these little tools to build our confidence, and particularly the business owners, it starts at the top. And as we know, it trickles down. So you want an owner at the top, who presents themselves with confidence, who shows their team and all of their employees that they're committed to them. And there are simple things that you can do to come across that way to build that loyalty and that trust and the connection, but people don't know

that. So they do, as you said, get caught in the crosshairs. And it's a delicate spot to be sometimes,

Shye Gilad 6:00

Absolutely. And you know, you used the word earlier, which is modeling. And if you didn't have someone around you to model good communications and good behaviors around addressing issues and being able to speak clearly. And in difficult situations, chances are, you're probably not really great at that. And maybe you don't have some of these tools. And as the business owner, whether you like it or not, you're always modeling behavior, you know, people pick up on everything that you do. That's what drives your culture. So you've given us some of these great tools. So can you give us some insights? Can you share some of those tips with us, maybe some of the mistakes that you see business owners make, and what are some ways they can improve?

Debra Roberts 6:38

Absolutely. One of the things that I think is most common that I hear, as human beings we don't like when we feel like someone's blaming us for something or we feel like we're being attacked or criticized. And so we defend ourselves. And it's almost this knee-jerk reaction that we have. And once you get defensive, the conversation ends in any side of the conversation. As soon as someone gets defensive. Now we're talking about your reaction, and we stopped talking about whatever the content or the topic was. So if you're having a conversation with someone, and you don't like what they're saying, you can feel what it would be like the hairs in the back of your neck, you know, whatever it is, and you just know that you're feeling attacked, you're feeling blamed, and you're very uncomfortable, and they may have a legitimate point or not, you may agree or disagree, instead of getting defensive or lashing out and shutting down one or the other. Ask a question, get more information, help me understand what you're trying to say to me, or I'm not following you, or I'm not sure I agree. But fill me in on what you're talking about. When you do that, you create space and a moment for them to give you more information that you may need in order to fully understand what they're saying. And what it also does. And this is my favorite part is it gives you time to collect your thoughts and say to yourself, I don't want to be defensive, let me try to respond a little bit more eloquently supportive, something thoughtfully different than just defending myself or getting mad at them. So if you ask a question, instead of getting defensive, you'll learn more from the other person. That's a great tip in any interaction.

Craig Moen 8:22

I love that element of giving people space, allowing people to think about what they just said, Oh, to better understand what angle they're coming at you with so many times, we quickly react and it was wrong. And we feel bad about it. The other elements of the relationship protocol, just curious how many elements are there in the protocol?

Debra Roberts 8:45

The relationship protocol has two key elements, which are requirements for every healthy interaction, productive conversation, and even to have a healthy relationship. And then there are

four steps. And the steps are what we use to have the conversations whether it's to engage someone in an interaction, to build trust, to resolve a conflict, that type of a thing.

Craig Moen 9:11

So we've got a real challenge over the last almost two years now of COVID-19. And working remotely and all of these new dynamics of communications that have come about and maybe really derailed and tested and curious about and I'm curious from a business owner, how do I sensitize myself to some of the symptoms that I should be picking up on to know whether my organization's communications are broken?

Debra Roberts 9:42

It's such a great question, and I love that an owner would even have that mindset because they're already moving in the right direction. If their thinking process is Wow, what's going on around me is making me nervous and or concerned that perhaps my state If you are not content or are thinking of leaving, and what do I need to do? There are many people who put blinders on when this type of situation is going on and assume everything's okay. I would rather that the owner started from the perspective of what you just said, correct, which is, what do I need to do? And what needs to happen is communication needs to increase, looking for feedback, asking questions, how can I improve the experience of you working here? Is there anything we can do? Some companies give surveys to their employees if they want to do it anonymously. Others have managers having conversations, finding out what the experiences of the employee and if someone is leaving during an exit interview asking them, you know, is there some advice that you might give me to prevent me from losing another great person who works with us? Now? I don't want them to be talking to recruiters. Is there something I can do on our end that people aren't telling me that I'm missing? Are we missing something? What's the best part about working here? Engage in interactions that find out if there's something that you're not seeing and something that they need? Whether it's a difference in compensation or more flexibility with hours? Whatever it is because everybody's different? Do they feel a sense of belonging? Is there that connection? Do they feel that they matter? Everybody these days is thinking about their happiness, work isn't just working anymore. They're making choices based on the quality of life and other factors that were not in the mix as much before. So it would behoove all owners to take a step back and look at what they offer, and how people seem to be feeling experiencing, and responding in the organization, and then make decisions based on that.

Craig Moen 11:57

Some great insight and looking at this full spectrum of communications, and even the nonverbal communications with the working remote than using Zoom, and what are you seeing arising out of these relationships of communications and building trust and so forth?

Debra Roberts 12:17

Well, I wrote an article that was on Business Insider, called "How to get someone to like you on zoom in under five minutes". The year before I wrote a similar article, how to get someone to like you in under five minutes. And they said, now that people are on Zoom, there's a whole other way of people relating to each other. So everybody knows that things are different now. What

the online community has created is that it requires us to be more communicative, to pay more attention to how we come across to be a little bit more upbeat, sometimes online, so that people can feel a little bit more of your energy through the screen, and to participate in ways that let the other person know that you're present. And it's very easy to get lost when you're working remotely and to feel isolated. So it's on the person who's overseeing you. And it's up to you as the employee to make sure that you feel connected and that you're doing everything that you can do as well to be a part of the organization, whether the way that they offer onboarding or things hopefully are different, to engage more with the remote workers. Sometimes you need to have a social hour or a coffee hour because now everybody's not meeting in the lunchroom, so to speak, we're going out to lunch together. And there are just different accommodations that if you make them, everybody does still feel connected, but you have to make a little extra effort.

Craig Moen 13:49

I like what you were saying earlier about the business owner or the leader leading in communications and being the template or the model. Where do they start? What do you think is the best return on investment for the first step for a business owner?

Debra Roberts 14:06

I think they have to know what the values are for their business and make sure that they model those if it's loyalty if it's community, and if the employees are seeing that the employer is committed to them, they will get that back. I worked with a gentleman who ran a few different franchises and he had hundreds of employees. And we had a conversation about commitment and how we show up and letting people know that you're consistent that they matter that this organization matters to you, and that you care about your employees. And you may not be able to have conversations with all of them, but that you care about them that their experience is important to you. And after he took my course he embraced wanting to become a better communicator. And he ended up having this meeting brought all of the employees from all the different franchises together. And the entire conversation was about his commitment to them, and what he was promising to do for them, and the kind of listener that he wanted, and was working toward becoming because he realized that he wasn't doing that before. And while he wasn't facing a lot of people leaving the company, he didn't want to see that happening. He wanted them to know that he wanted them to stay. And using our words and saying those things out loud, you are important to us. Or to me, You're important to this company, we care about you, we care what your experiences here. And we want everybody to know we are in this together, we're part of a team, you will garner loyalty when you do that. And that's what you want from your people. So from the top down, starting with demonstrating your commitment. And one more thing I'll say is I teach something called turning towards, and commitment and turning towards shifting your thinking to a Wii orientation. Those are the two key elements of the relationship protocol model. So you want the other person to know that you notice them that you acknowledge them, that you connect with their experience. And we do that by communicating that and by validating people. And when leaders do that, they create a much more positive culture, one that people in the work environment are usually happier, it's a lighter environment. And they're also committed and loyal to the organization.

Craig Moen 16:26

Debra wondering going forward? Where do you see us going as business leaders and organizational structures and dynamics, and an example the other day listening to an author talk about the different protocols in a zoom environment? And the question came up, can you ever over-communicate, knows bounce back and forth back forth, and the author was going into the element of there's different styles of people course. And the ones that do not participate as well in group situations need to be helped brought into the conversation, from a business owner standpoint is that an area that we really should be more sensitive to,

Debra Roberts 17:12

That's part of the person who has direct contact with that person to know whether it's a supervisor or a business owner, it is important that every person in the organization has a touchpoint with someone else, so that people aren't so far removed, that you don't know what's going on with them. And I was working with a company where there was a woman who, when everything started to go remote, she started to kind of fall off the screen. And that's not the right expression. But they didn't know what was happening with her. And it ended up that she was getting overwhelmed at home. And the job wasn't working as well for her remotely, and she got depressed, and nobody knew, because they couldn't reach her. So they let her do her thing because she was submitting her work. But nobody was really talking to her, it's not a smart move, you have to be able to take kind of the internal temperature of what's going on in your organization. So if there are people who struggle with communication, there's an expression I use who's on the other side of the interaction. And everybody does need to pay attention to that and communicate a little bit differently depending upon who you're speaking with. And if it's someone who isn't a great communicator, or they hesitate, reach out to them and mention, we're here for you, we want to stay in touch with you. This is how often we have our meetings, and we would love for you to contribute. Maybe they're more comfortable in the written word but letting them know that they are valued and that they don't have to be concerned about giving you feedback or expressing themselves that you're open to hearing different opinions and ideas. That's where innovation comes from. And sometimes it's the quiet ones that don't say anything who are more creative, and you wish they would offer their opinions and their thoughts.

Shye Gilad 18:57

So Deborah, one thing I've experienced is even when we can improve, and you've given us a lot of great advice on how to think about our communications with others in the workspace and thinking about leadership in terms of communication. And even as we get better as individuals, our organizations are growing. And it gets harder and harder to model that behavior one on one all the time. What kind of systems should we be thinking about to put in place to facilitate regular communications and dress some of these issues before they reached a boiling point?

Debra Roberts 19:32

Well, many companies are instituting town halls where they have monthly meetings with the entire staff and they fill them in with what's going on, the more transparent you are about what's happening in the company. People want to know that. And then on the smaller scale, you have different departments meeting and it's up to the different layers to make sure that they have a

team that knows that they can communicate with the team leader. So you need to make sure that the people that are leading those teams, whether it's management supervisors, C suite, whomever it is, they have to be effective communicators. And they have to make sure that it's an open environment and inclusive environment for all the people on the team. And quite frankly, that's why I created my online course, because it includes everybody from the managers to the employees, so that everybody can learn how to be effective leaders and as an employee to be a leader to be able to speak up and express what they need to say, because so often there does become that place where things get stuck or trapped. But you want to make sure that at every point of the next layer within the business, that everybody has access to be able to have a conversation and they're checking in with them, make it a priority, that there's a touch point, a quick one every week, and then every month for the entire organization.

Shye Gilad 21:03

You know, I've seen some people also experimenting with different tools, you know, as we talked about this online environment that many of us are trying to manage, or a hybrid work environment, where they're actually videotaping themselves making a statement, or at least recording these online forums. So for people that couldn't be there live, at least they can experience that interaction.

Debra Roberts 21:24

Yeah, I've heard people using Loom to do that, where they're showing whatever they showed to everybody with them, you can see them also in the video, and super helpful to do things like that and make everybody feel included.

Shye Gilad 21:36

Yeah, I think that's so important. And again, it's just sort of controlling the narrative. And I mean that in a very positive way, not in a manipulative way. But being sure that people are hearing from you directly. They're always going to draw their own conclusions, of course, but if you have a vacuum of information, they're just going to fill in the blanks. And then all of a sudden, your culture is running away from you.

Debra Roberts 21:58

That's absolutely right. That's such a great point. Because we tend to make assumptions and or people personalize things. I'm sure they're talking everybody else except me, you know, whatever it is, we come up with stories in our head, don't give people room to do that.

Shye Gilad 22:12

Yeah, that's great advice. And so what happens then when the bad thing happens, right, when there's still this difference in expectations, and we have to manage conflicts that arise, this is one of those places, it's so uncomfortable for folks. And again, if you were brought up in a household where people avoided conflict or didn't have healthy behaviors around how to talk about it, you probably haven't learned that. So what can you tell us about how to manage that better?

Debra Roberts 22:39

So when you're approaching someone who could be challenging, go in with an open mind that they also want to have a good outcome? Prepare a little bit, if you can, thinking about what kind of result Am I looking for here? And are there takeaways that I want them to have. So that's a great way to approach once you're having the conversation if you can tell it's not going well, or if they give you feedback, where they let you know they're unhappy, they're angry at you, they're upset with something going on. Instead of making excuses or putting it back on them, before I talked about something called turning towards, which means that you're paying attention to the other person who's on the other side of the interaction, and you want to connect with their experience, the best thing you can do in that moment, is acknowledge what they're saying. So that's what validation is. So you would say, Okay, I understand that you're upset. And I'm sorry, if we did something that upset you, I apologize. If we created an environment that made you feel isolated, that certainly was not our intention, what can we do to change that? As soon as you start to say, well, you know, Charlie, if you had behaved differently, if you did this that's on you. Or Oh, everybody says that, you know, however you minimize what they're saying to you, or react to it and get upset with them. That doesn't resolve a conflict, what works and what diffuses when we connect with the other person's experience, you don't have to apologize, because you may not have done anything wrong, and it may not be the appropriate thing to do. But you have to at least acknowledge and recognize that the other person is hurting, they're upset. They need to say something, or that you're confused. It seems like you're upset about something before we continue, tell me what's going on for you. Because this doesn't seem to be going the direction I expected it to. You stop the action before it continues to escalate. A lot of times we're in it and we're just in it and we're watching things get out of control or we're feeling out of control or confused or frozen. And the best thing to do as soon as you notice, because you're participating in the conversation, but you're also observing it so as soon as you notice that something is going awry. You stop the action and When you say, Hey, what's going on, you know, you seem like you're getting upset, I don't want you to be upset, let's try to see if we can have a good outcome, you acknowledge what's going on for them. And if you've done something, own it, but you're owning just that moment, and that situation, you're not owning everything you've ever done in your life or to that person. So it's not about pride as much as it is about connection. And that's how we connect. That's how we build trust. And that's how we resolve quicker when everybody goes in and kind of owns their part, and or at least acknowledges what's happening for the other person. And between you as well.

Shye Gilad 25:36

You said, so many things that are helpful there made me think about just how hard it can be sometimes to just prepare to have these conversations and how if you go in, and you're not prepared, you could get triggered and get confused. Because now it feels like fight or flight because you're dealing with someone who's upset, and you might become defensive without even realizing it. So what recommendations do you have around just getting into the right mindset and preparing to have different kinds of conversations where you know that conflict could arise?

Debra Roberts 26:09

One of the things I talk a lot about, in general, is how do you prepare? And how do you actually have those conversations? One way to prepare is to sit down and think about what do I want to accomplish? What is my end goal? And how do I want the other person to feel, which is kind of an odd question in the business world? But if you think about it logically, it's the reaction, what reaction do I want them to have? Do I want them to know that I'm serious? Do I want them to know I'm upset about something? Do I want them to know, I appreciate them do I want them to know, this is the deal with salary increases? Whatever it is. So you're looking at the outcome, the end result? You start by thinking what's the end result? And then you work backwards? What are the takeaways I want them to have? How do I want to come across, and that can take all of five minutes at the most, it doesn't have to be an evening of preparation, but it can be I have a template for preparing for an important conversation in my course. Because it's that important. Some people are wingers they kind of go in and just start talking. And exactly what you said, what if that was their only shot to have that good conversation, and they just made a really crummy impression. Some people go in with assumptions about what the other person's going to say, and they are not open or interested. So going in with an open mind that the other person also wants to have a good outcome. That's the mindset you need to have no matter how challenging the person is, no matter how difficult that customer is, or your coworker, if you approach the conversation, or your boss or your employee approach with an open mind that they also want to have a good result here. And it may be different than your end result. You may not agree, you kind of agree to disagree, but at least it's a productive conversation. That's the goal.

Shye Gilad 28:01

Well, Deborah, I want to thank you so much for joining us today. We really enjoyed having you.

Debra Roberts

This is great. I love talking to both of you.

Shye Gilad

Well, you mentioned your online course. And I'm wondering if there's anything else you'd like to share with our listeners?

Debra Roberts 28:14

Sure, there's a lot of information on my website, therelationshipprotocol.com There are two complimentary downloads. One is how to build trust in an organization. And the other is how to have three of the most common conversations that most people avoid. And there is information on there about my two courses, one for personal use relationships and individuals to have better interactions and relationships and the other it's for the workplace, everything from large corporations, smaller businesses, and people who want to improve workplace communication in a practical way, and a more effective way so that they can improve the culture and everything we're talking about here today. I'm just excited that the world is coming around to realizing the importance of making connections and relationships in business. That's what brings in the

money. That's what keeps people there. And it excites me to reach more people and obviously talk about this topic. So thank you for having me.

Craig Moen 29:17

Our guest today has been Deborah Roberts, author of the relationship protocol, how to talk, defuse and build healthier relationships. She is a conversation expert, developer of the relationship protocol communication model, as well as a trauma consultant and licensed clinical social worker. Deborah has a private practice and consults with businesses the world over. You can find links to our online course and to free downloads on our website at businessownersradio.com.

Announcer 29:52

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