

Join Julie Livingston, founder and president of WantLeverage Communications and host of PR Patter, a series of talks focusing on relevant topics in marketing and public relations today, in conversation with Dr. Deb Mashek, an author, experienced business advisor professor, higher education administrator, and national nonprofit executive.

Livingston and Mashek discuss why collaboration in working relationships is so important, how to create collaborative teams and work culture, fostering interdepartmental collaboration, and more.

“In the LinkedIn strategy work I do for senior executives, I'm often writing on their behalf about how collaborative their culture is, and what they're able to get accomplished because of it. When you're able to tell that story about collaboration to outside stakeholder audiences, it really positions your organization as one that is right in step with cultural standards, it shows that you are an emotionally intelligent organization, and shows that you are one that is going to be beneficial in terms of generating great stuff.”

“When I lead internal teams, I found the sure way to innovate and be creative was to collaborate. I would start something and then I'd hand it over and say, you know, put your touch on it, edit it, feel free, because I want your input, I want your perspective, and I know that together we're gonna come up with something even better.”

“It's an ongoing process and work to get people to really collaborate and work well together so that they're feeding each other.”

—Julie Livingston

“Collaboration is the process of two or more individuals who know each other working together towards some shared goal. That can be short term, long term. It can be remote, hybrid, in person. It can be something that's governed by a heck of a lot of contracts, or it can be something that's more informal. There really are a lot of different ways that we work together, and I think it's important to point out the root of co-collaboration is co-labor, or together work.”

“On a team, if you've got competition, that means that they see each other as competing for the resources or the time, or the assets or the outcomes, the accolades, what those sorts of things are. But if collaboration is going well within the organization, it's actually a competitive advantage.”

“We need to be thinking about how we're talking about it and demonstrating it. It's more complicated than just throwing the word collaboration on your social. Like, that's not going to do the trick.”

“If you're a leader, look at your incentives. If you say you want collaboration, but the only thing you're rewarding is individual outputs and products, you have a misalignment.”

—Dr. Deb Mashek

Edited Transcript:

Julie Livingston:

Good morning everyone, and I'm so thrilled to be here again for another installment of Julie's PR Patter. I'm Julie Livingston, I'm president of WantLeverage Communications, a LinkedIn marketing and public relations agency here in New York. I am delighted to have a fantastic guest with me today. Her name is Dr. Deb Mashach. She's a PhD and an experienced business advisor professor, higher education administrator, and a national nonprofit executive. Wow. Previously a full professor of social psychology at Harvey Mudd College, Deb is the author of the newly published book, Collaborate: How to Build Incredibly Collaborative Relationships at Work, even if You'd Rather Work Alone. I love that. I love that little, that tagline there. She was named one of the top 25 Women in Higher Education. Deb has been featured in major media outlets, including the New York Times, the Atlantic, and she writes regularly for Psychology Today. Deb, thank you so much for joining me. This topic of collaboration is something that's really near and dear to my heart. As someone who has led marketing communications teams and regularly works within my own business, I work with lots of outside vendors and, and people, client teams. Collaboration is so critical, but it doesn't always work.

Deb Mashek:

It's a pleasure to be here. There's definitely a lot of pain in collaboration for a lot of us, at least some of the time, and I think we gotta talk about that if we have any hope of making this whole playing well together thing more productive and less painful for everyone.

Julie Livingston:

I totally agree. Why don't you start out and just define what collaboration is?

Deb Mashek:

It's one of these words that needs a lot of unpacking, in part because culturally we throw it around. It's like, yes, it's good to collaborate, we should collaborate. Companies throw it on the letterhead or back in the time before you would walk into these corporations, and it's one of the words that would be stenciled on the wall, along with excellence and innovation. You would see collaboration, but there's often very little effort in those spaces to actually say what do we mean by this? Sure, it's a value. Sure, it's a skill in the sense that you need people who know how to follow through on what they say they're gonna do. You need people who know really basic things around time management and project management. You need people who know the skills of how to contribute meaningfully and constructively, and God forbid, on topic and meetings. That's all really important. Collaboration is also this entire ecosystem when we talk about companies. When I think about what collaboration is— you mentioned that I'm a past professor, I'm a recovering academic, so I have to define my terms. I take the perspective that collaboration is the process of two or more individuals who know each other working together towards some shared goal. That can be short term, long term. It can be remote, hybrid in person. It can be, you know, something that's governed by a heck of a lot of contracts, or it can be something that's more informal. There really are a lot of different ways that we work together, and I think it's important to point out that the root of co-collaboration is co-labor or together work.

This is a broad space with a lot of different moving parts and it's sometimes hard to pin down and thus— I think that's part of the reason it's hard to get right.

Julie Livingston:

I have managed teams when I've been on staff and corporations and I have often found that there is an anti-collaboration culture where people are more in competition with each other. So tell me what's at stake? What happens when collaboration goes well or doesn't go so well?

Deb Mashek:

There's this whole dynamic of what happens if it's sizzles versus fizzles. I love that you point out the relationship that a lot of people assume to exist between collaboration and competition. What's interesting is, on a team, if you've got competition, that means that they see each other as the other person on the team is the person competing for resources or the time or whatever the assets or the outcomes, the accolades, those sorts of things are. If collaboration is going well within the organization, it's actually a competitive advantage. When you think about those other organizations or your true competitors as the competition, then if we're working well together, so if the organs in the organization are truly harmonized and doing resonance and all, everything's feeling good and working well, that is a benefit to the company. When it, so when collaboration sizzles, you get these high level benefits to the organization around bottom lines. When it is sizzling, you get benefits to the team, such as the timelines are being met and things are humming along, and the baton tosses are really clean and you get benefits for individuals. When we are on teams and we're, we're feeling visible and seen, and we're actually able to make a contribution, and it's fun...

Julie Livingston:

Then how does fun factor into work?

Deb Mashek:

We know that people who are in high quality collaborative relationships— their anxiety is lower, their depression is lower, their engagement at work and their workplace satisfaction is higher. There are these benefits for individuals, for teams, and for organizations across all of these spaces of timelines, bottom lines, wellbeing, innovation, all the things we say we care about yet, this black box, the collaboration people aren't necessarily pulling the levers there in a way that can actually help those things they care about most.

Julie Livingston:

This is so powerful and, you know, aside from fostering a collaborative culture, company culture, internally with clients if you're a service provider, having a collaborative culture provides you with an opportunity to tell your story about being collaborative. This has tremendous PR benefits. I know that in the LinkedIn strategy work that I do for executives and for senior executives, I'm often writing on their behalf about how collaborative their culture is and what they're able to get accomplished because of it. When you're able to tell that story about collaboration to outside stakeholder audiences, it really positions your organization as one that is, you know, right in step with 21st century standards, cultural standards. It shows that you are

an emotionally intelligent organization and one that is going to be beneficial in terms of generating great stuff. You're probably going to be and tend to be more innovative and creative in problem solving because people are working so well together. There is a great story there and one that really, as you say, is a competitive advantage and one that you can promote heavily.

Deb Mashek:

You bring up a couple really important points. I want to double click on one, which is the idea that we're not just collaborating within the team, but also external vendors. You're collaborating with your customers, you're collaborating on behalf of your customers. One of the first things I do when I'm getting ready to go into an organization– I'll go look at Trustpilot, I'll go look at what's happening on their social feeds. If you're not telling the story about you being collaborative, chances are somebody else is telling the story about how you're not, and it could be your past employees who you know on...

Julie Livingston:

Glassdoor.

Deb Mashek:

Thank you. They're telling the story about your toxic work culture and how people are in competition and how they hate going into work because the people are jerks. You know what? That those are big fat red flags that you've got a collaboration problem.

Julie Livingston:

Big time.

Deb Mashek:

I'm also looking at Trustpilott. If I see stories about this customer who got passed off from person to person to get a solution to their tech problem, for instance, that's a collaboration problem. There's something happening behind the scenes that really is signaling the parts are not working together. It's like the gears and the clock are all crusty and rusty and just not moving. That becomes really apparent. If you see those sorts of flags, it is a PR problem.

Julie Livingston:

It really does affect your reputation. It affects the way you can't attract new talent and retain talent, and it's today's market. That's not something to be taken lightly.

Deb Mashek:

There's some data from simply five. Unfortunately, I don't know when it was collected, because that detail is not on the report talking about how many people have considered leaving a job because of poor workplace relationships. It's incredibly high. How many people are actively right now thinking about leaving because of poor workplace relationships? The number is really high. The idea that collaboration is somehow a nice to have or that it's something you, you try to retrofit, by the way, collaboration's really hard to retrofit, but you can't just retrofit. You can't just

be like, oh, well, we had a happy hour. Why don't people like each other? It's not just nice to have— it's essential. We absolutely need to invest in it upfront at the very beginning of onboarding. We need to be thinking about, as you talk about with the PR piece, how we're talking about it and demonstrating it. It's more complicated than just throwing the word collaboration on your social. Like, that's not gonna do the trick.

Julie Livingston:

No, it's not. It's not a one and done, right? It's an ongoing process, an ongoing, a working process to get people to really collaborate and work, work well together so that they're feeding each other. How can business leaders create a culture of collaboration? Do you have any tips that you could share?

Deb Mashek:

I touched on it a little bit at the top— where we need to think holistically about the collaboration ecosystem. It begins with hiring people who feel positively about collaboration, who you can, you know, look at past behaviors, look at how they talk about their former collaborators and see if they're using “we” instead of a bunch of I words. How we hire and bring people in who have a collaborative orientation— that matters when we're onboarding before we start putting people on a bunch of interdependent teams where my outcomes are dependent on your behaviors, and then I might dislike you very quickly, go ahead and give time to let people develop relationships with other people. It can be as simple as, you know, paying for coffee just for them to go out for coffee with everybody on the team. Do introductions beyond just, here's my role and job description, but— who are you, what do you care about? What makes you tick? What keeps you up at night? What do you love? You know, tell me about your family. Get to know other people. Definitely. You can structure that as a leader into the onboarding. So you've got these collaborative individuals, collaborative relationships thinking then about collaborative culture. There are five things you need to have in place. Quite frankly, collaboration first needs to be possible, because if you've put up all sorts of barriers in your infrastructure, where it's not even possible to collaborate, guess what? You're not going to get it next. You need to have collaboration that is easy. You know, remember that moment when we all moved into remote work and suddenly it's like, oh, how are we going to work? The interfaces weren't in place to actually make collaboration easy, then we all quickly onboarded, you know, Zoom and other, other digital project products that made that possible.

Julie Livingston:

You need to know how to use them too, those tech tools, right?

Deb Mashek:

You can't just drop it in. Now it's possible, and we've made it easy. Next we need to make it normative. We need to make it clear that this is what we do. Whether it's a calendar invite that, you know, makes clear when the collaborative team is meeting, or we're telling the stories of the amazing collaborative team, what they did together that was beyond what any of them could have possibly done alone. Once we've made it normative, next we need to make it rewarding. Look, if you're a leader, look at your incentives. If you say you want collaboration, but the only

thing you're rewarding is individual outputs and products, you have misalignment. As any, you know, parent or pet owner will tell you, what gets rewarded gets repeated. If you're rewarding individual behaviors and outcomes, guess what? You're not going to get collaboration. So you want to get those aligned. And finally, if you have to, you can use policy as a way of making collaboration required so that the stack of five things is how you can really develop this collaborative culture.

Julie Livingston:

Those are great and, and really give me so much to think about. What is the role of the leader, whether it's at the top, the senior executive of the organization, or you know, of a group or team manager, department, department manager? What is their role in modeling collaborative behavior?

Deb Mashek:

That was the first thing that came to my mind is they've got to be walking the walk and talking the talk, right? If I say, oh, we're, you know, we value collaboration and I'm the leader, but then when it comes time for me, whether it's in the design or the implementation phase to add my value to that project, and I do it at the wrong time. I jump in and I start micromanaging and giving input when it's not my turn yet. Or if I say I'm going to get you feedback on that by Friday morning, you could turn it around, you know, Friday afternoon to the client, but then you don't bother to open the file until 4:00 PM. Guess what? You have just created a fire for everybody else on that team. You're signaling that actually I can't be trusted to keep my word. You're signaling that, by the way I'm not gonna say it explicitly because I could get in trouble from HR, but really I do expect you to be working on the weekend. You know, walking the talk, actually following through on what you say you're gonna do. And then, because that helps create trust, but also in the spirit of transparency, share— are we allowed to use, I won't say, I'll say share the crappy first draft, share the impartial work, the work that's not quite completed to model that. In fact, I trust others to step in, to give feedback in a way that helps us co-create this thing that we value. I'm not so anxious about other people's approval that I'm gonna hold tight and tell. It's just perfect because obviously none of our work is ever totally perfect.

Julie Livingston:

I love that. When I did lead internal teams, I found that that was the sure way to innovate and be creative, and I would kind of start something and then I'd hand it over and say, you know, put your touch on it, edit it, feel free, because I want your input, I want your perspective, and I know that together we're going to come up with something even better.

Deb Mashek:

When I think about higher up the ladder, so when we're talking about C-Suite— what can they be doing? I think even taking a look at or asking your people to take a look at the policies and the existing documents, including things like vendor contracts. If you look at your vendor contract, and it's all about protecting your interest, and there's nothing there about sharing risks, right? Guess what? You're singing. And this matters to me as an external contractor— when I look and it's all about how you can't sue us, but we can sue you. I'm like, why would I bother with

this? A contract where it's just asymmetrical. There are ways that you're signaling your orientation toward relationships and those external reports to your stakeholders in those communications to your whole team and even your vendor contracts. Take a look at them and ask with the lens of asking yourself, what does this say about how we value each other, how we value other people's contributions, how we value these relationships.

Julie Livingston:

One of the things— as I am a vendor to, as you are, to larger companies that want to increase their executive presence on LinkedIn, etc., and the media... One of the things that has really resonated with me is I have one client, she's the chief communications officer at a Fortune 50 company, and she on a regular basis says to me, how are you doing? Is there anything that we can be doing better? How is the communication going between our team and with you? Are you missing anything? It kind of stops me in my tracks because that is such an important sign of collaboration and caring.

Deb Mashek:

I love that. The other thing that's bubbling up for me is when we think about how we initiate and maintain collaborative action, one of the steps people often skip over is that assessment part. They might assess and say, are we meeting our KPIs? You know, like, does this product— did it sell enough units? Or something like that. They forget to evaluate the health of the collaboration itself. Is this together work that we're doing, still serving the needs, the interest, the hopes, the dreams of the individual contributors? If not, how do we bring it back into alignment? What she's doing there very clearly, and it sounds like in almost a, a pulse-like way, as opposed to waiting till the end of your contract or your work together, is she's saying, Hey Julie, I value you too. How's this going for you? Exactly. What else do you need? Do you have the resources, the skills, the people, the access that you're gonna need to help us be successful? That's incredible.

Julie Livingston:

It really is. And it's such a huge motivator. I'm motivated anyway. I want to do well by them and I really enjoy the work. But when she started checking in with me on a regular basis, first of all, I looked forward to it, and I feel like I just want to do better. I want to exceed their expectations. I want my creative wheels to be turning like crazy because I want to keep feeding them with new ideas because they value me.

Deb Mashek:

I imagine most of us are like that too. We want to be seen and valued. Imagine if that level of attention is given to everybody on our team, and imagine what we could unlock in terms of potential innovation, creativity, and coming up with incredible solutions to these incredible problems that are facing the world. Whether we're talking about in a non-profit organization or in a for-profit company, being able to unlock the incredible potential in your people that's sitting right there by seeing them and valuing them, what could be better? So amazing.

Julie Livingston:

I have one client that has a highly collaborative culture and they are a service provider to others

and to large companies. Their collaborative culture is so palpable that their clients are now trying to mirror them. They have not only delivered great work to the client, but their culture is now being copied by the client because they've kind of role modeled this incredible collaboration. One of the last things I wanted to ask you, Deb— we all kind of can work in a small internal team, but how do you foster interdepartmental collaboration? Sometimes you have those microcultures that exist. How do you get people to meet and get to know each other across departments? Let's say the tech department? I'm just making this up. Tech and human resources or marketing and technology.

Deb Mashek:

Or marketing and sales or manufacturing. I mean, the whole idea is that when we're trying to collaborate across differences, whether it's skip rank, interdepartmental, inter-organization across regional differences, time zone differences, generational differences, demographic differences, whatever it is, the principles are the same. First of all, we need to get to know other people as people. But also within those departments, guess what? You're going to be using different vocabulary. There's different jargon. There's different outcomes that are valued in that department versus that department. If you go in with your lens and assume that you already know what is valued over there, you're likely to make a misstep. So instead what you wanna do is sit down and say, what does good work look like over there? What do you really value? What are some of the concerns that you all are navigating? What do you wish more people understood about your department than they do? What do most people get wrong? Ideally you get a chance to share those same things and then you co-design the work. How do we want to work together? Different departments have different rhythms and cadences. For instance, in a PR space, you're working fast. I mean, it's like something comes in, you're responding the next minute, but in another department it might be like, yeah, like in academia for instance, what is the curriculum? Well, we're going to talk about that for next semester, and the time horizons are really different. Sure. Unless we're sensitive to the possibility that our assumptions about how work needs to get done are not shared, we're not going to bother asking other people to kind of reveal what's inside for them. That to me is such a critical step. Organizational leaders can help create those conversations and can offer templates of like, here are some questions I have, like the ones I rattled off. You could share those and say, we're going to ask you to do this cross-departmental work. I recommend you start by spending 30 minutes talking through these five items.

Julie Livingston:

That's like an icebreaker too, because the people aren't at all uncomfortable about it, and that's natural. They at least have a starting point.

Deb Mashek:

I think this is one of the reasons those individuals who have bounced around across different functional areas over their career are able to figure out the vocabulary, the jargon they're able to serve in this translator role that really does, you know, grease the skids for good interdepartmental collaboration.

Julie Livingston:

That's awesome. Deb, thank you so much. I can't believe we're out of time, but thank you so much for joining

Deb Mashek:

That was incredibly fast. Thank you!

Julie Livingston:

Look for Deb's new book Collaborate. It's available on Amazon.

Deb Mashek:

Yes.

Julie Livingston:

Deb, I hope you'll come back sometime and we'll continue this later. Have a great day everyone, and I'll see you next week on another installment of Julie's PR Patter.