

The Leadership Diet with Liz Van Vliet

Welcome Liz.

Liz: thank you very much for having me Pod,

Pod: first of all, 120 episodes of your podcast and in podcasting world, that's almost 10 years worth of content.

Liz: Thank you. Thank you. I was congratulating myself on when I first started on getting to 10 episodes and now where, I passed a hundred and almost at 120, as we record this

Pod: well done, I think that's probably exciting. And a noble accomplishment. Let's jump to the notion of an executive assistant. It's one of the roles that is often deemed to be a core role in a team are often delegated to bare administration support. And dare I say it, the second.

The second delegation doesn't help anybody, particularly president their role, you own the business, my ear career. What do you hear from your clients as being their frustrations as they're trying to support leaders that they're working with?

Liz: I think the top frustration would be that it's a high stress, low control.

Role. So because you are managing by influence, but because effectively you have very little control over, what's actually coming at you as an individual, but your. Basking in the stress that the leader has coming at them and therefore flows on to you. I would describe that as the biggest frustration that your ability to be proactive is constantly under pressure because of the high stress, low control environment that you're operating within.

And you have to be comfortable with being in that environment to thrive.

Pod: And the notion of low control. that's really interesting one. So because the role of executive assistant is really an enablement type role. It enables a leader to do their role more efficiently and more effectively get low control doesn't mean low influence, it can be a very influential role.

Liz: Absolutely. And the EAs that I see that really are operating at that highest level have. Actually taken ownership of the fact that they do have a seat at the table by the factor of being that EA to the leader. And they actually need to step up and claim that seat at the table, not in an, certainly not in an aggressive way.

But in an, in a way that, speaks to the fact that they, that the leader has confidence, trust and confidence in them, that the leader has designated them as somebody that does have

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their ear and does have the ability to actually have an influence on things that need to happen and need to be executed.

So it's. It's taking on an active role rather than a passive role,

Pod: which I've into how executive assistants can really help leaders. Let, maybe let's just dial back a little bit. What's the difference in your eyes between secretary or say a personal assistant and an executive system? Is there a difference and if so, what are they?

Liz: I think. Way that I look at it, I've developed something called the EA competency model and that's actually driving at the heart of that issue because I think there is a confusion out there. And when I talk to some HR professionals, for example, they have the perception that an EAs or a diamond doesn't that you can fill a seat.

If an EA was to suddenly not be available for their leader, that they would be able to slot anyone into that role. But I would suggest that's a fallacy because the competencies that I see it as an. describe it as quadrants, that EA competency model and at the very top, in terms of, if you think of the axis as functional competency and strategic competency as the X and Y axis that the order taker is at the very bottom is the bottom left.

And that's what I would describe. As in some cases it would actually be the PA somebody that is. Very reactive that is taking instruction is not using initiative is not expected to use initiative. so for example, if you've employed somebody off shore, in the Philippines or somewhere else, then you are going to have to accept that person is very much an order taker.

They're not, they have limited. strategic competency. They're certainly not going to have the capability to be able to predict and anticipate your needs. Whereas somebody that's at the top. As what I described as a linchpin pin assistant is somebody that has. High strategic competency and high functional competency.

So they're extremely capable in terms of efficiencies, but they're also extremely capable in terms of their strategic competency and their ability to see around corners. And that is where linchpin assistance or what I would define as the ideal.

Pod: I love that notion of see around corners. And if I go back to your earlier comment about some folks in organizations say to the role of VAs dime a dozen, that may well be at that as you're describing the bottom left-hand corner.

So there's someone who's reactive, who too does the admin support, who does what is being asked of them was sitting the leaders I've worked with who have really excellent executive assistants. They do have that ability to see around corners. They do have the ability to save time. They do have the ability to prepare in advance for presentations or team meetings, et cetera.



And they certainly manage calendars judiciously on behalf of the leader because of that notion, being able to see around corners. I love that notion of linchpin. I think it really describes the idea of executive system for a senior leader, at least in our organization. When you are working with executive systems and in your business, you do both coaching and training.

And then a whole lot of speaking around this space, what are some of the things you get executive assistants to think about in terms of how they can move towards that notion of being more linchpin, like in their service?

Liz: I describe it that for you to actually spend more time and be more.

Present in that linchpin quadrant, it's actually about developing what I describe as your power skills. And I call them power skills because they're, we call them that they're actually what we often describe as our soft skills. But I described them as power skills because for an executive assistant, they are, they need to be your soft skills on steroids.

They really need to be the thing that powers you to be able to deliver in your role as a linchpin. And so they're the classic things that you would think about in terms of soft skills. So they're influencing skills, managing up negotiation skills. Communication skills, listening skills, all of those sorts of things.

And I've got 10 of them that I've identified as the key power skills that really enable EAs to show up as linchpin assistants. When I'm talking to AIS, when I'm speaking to AIS, when I'm coaching AAS, I describe it as what I call the knowing assistant framework. And it's made up of five things. So there's the knowing yourself component.

There's the knowing your leader. There's the knowing your job. There's the knowing your power skills, and then there's the knowing your organization. So I look at it and I. Train and coachee in a holistic way to be able to say that these, all of these pieces are important. And if you can focus on developing and then being supported in terms of your development around all of these elements, you will be able to show up.

Differently and add more value in your role.

Pod: Let's jump to one of those 10. The notion of knowing the leader diet is all about leadership and effective leadership. How can an executive assistant who's been in the organization for awhile, they let's say they inherit a new leader. So a new CEO comes in or a new business leader comes in. What can that executive system do to really get to know the leaders?

Preferences are styles of thinking or behavior patterns more than just the obvious by observing it because over time he can observe that. But how can the leader, how can the executive system accelerate that process? So they know the leader say within a month, as opposed to six months,



Liz: I have a concept called.

Three PS, which I encourage all the, to adopt when they take on a new executive new business later. And that's about understanding their preferences, their pet peeves and their priorities. So that is a, an intentional conversation. And it's not just a, one-off, it's a conversation that you set the frame, the foundations for the relationship from the get-go and then some cases that might actually begin when you're interviewing for the role, but certainly in the, at the very least, it happens immediately when you commence the role.

and you commence that relationship and in the same way, as we think. Think about a leader having a fast start. and the first 90 days being important for the leader, I encourage AI's to think about having that intentional conversation with the leader about what do you want to see from me in the first 90 days?

And what can. I understand what will help me to be able to execute those things. What do I need to know about you? So I have some, some feedback surveys that I get the EAs to sit down and actually do with their business later. And sometimes what I, this is not always in an ideal world. This would happen when you first.

Start in that new relationship. But a lot of the EAs that I work with have been working with their executive for a while and have actually when they come to me or when I'm brought in to deal with them, they're actually the relationship has broken down somewhat and the leader or the executive assistant.

Has said, I think we need to do something here. And so sometimes that activity is actually retrospective, but something as simple as sitting down and having a conversation around the three PS is a very good place to start. And actually I think at the heart of it, it's actually being comfortable asking questions.

And again, that's something that. AIS that are operating, that are already at supporting business leaders that are the CEO or the country manager might already be comfortable with that. But I find with the EIS that I deal with that there is an innate hesitancy around asking questions. I for fear of looking like you don't know what's going on and B there is this perception and I've heard it from a lot of EIS.

A lot of VA's believe that they would like to be seen as, having some sort of magical powers, some sort of mystical wouldn't we all that they can predict without actually. Asking questions or seeking to understand, but I'm a big exponent of the whole Steven Coby seek first to understand. And in order to understand, you've got to ask questions, you've got to be comfortable asking questions.

So one of the things that I do as part of the knowing your boss, part of the framework is actually worked through. How do I ask good questions? How do I ask questions that are going to get an, asking open-ended questions? not asking compound questions, seeking to



clarify, restating things back to the leader, to make sure that you've understood correctly and then drilling down.

The other thing that's important to say is that none of this, the idea of the knowing assistant framework is not to add a layer of any sort of onerous layer to the relationship in actual fact when it's working well, it's actually something that feels just natural and organic. It actually builds the relationship and the questions and the clarification's become a natural part of that relationship.

It's not something that feels forced or, in any way difficult.

Pod: I think what you're describing the area is the fundamentals of dialogical process we had in a sales role leadership role on this case and exec assistant role, which goes to lubricating the relationship for better outcomes.

Liz: Yes, but what I find with AIS is that they can struggle with confidence. To actually advocate for themselves. So if we loop back to your first question, which is about the frustrations, one of the frustrations that I do hear a lot is in terms of that feeling, that they. Because they don't have control that they don't have the ability to speak up when they need to, and actually advocate for themselves.

So it's one thing to advocate for your business leaders needs. It's another thing to advocate for your own needs. And so it's all around that, confidence to advocate for yourself around. Setting boundaries around communicating back to the leader when something's not working well.

Pod: We hope you're enjoying this episode of the leadership diet.

Feel free to hit the subscribe button on whatever podcast player you are listening to this on reviews on iTunes and Spotify. I greatly appreciate it. Let's jump to the leader then. Cause they, the leader, obviously from a power dynamic perspective and an authority level of perspective is the more, let's say the more senior person in that relationship.

Therefore there's a little bit of an onus on how the leader can seek to optimize to a relationship in my own experience. I've been, Astounded over the years as to how little time leaders can spend in, again, you quote Steven coy, sharpening the saw as opposed to cutting the tree. So the relationship here with how do you optimize it?

What would you say to them? Or one or two key questions or ideas that they can put into the conversation that will then lead to optimizing the whole relationship?

Liz: the first thing I would ask them is. To think about their, how intentional they are around communicating with their EA. I did a survey, which has I continued to seek input into.

So now over it's around 250 responses are, and one of the questions is around how business leaders actually. Connect and, update have conversations with their EAs. Do they have a



daily update? Do they have a weekly update? Do they have no update at all? And it's really interesting how so many, the large proportion continues to be that the conversations that.

The dialogue between the leader and the AI is ad hoc and spontaneous. It's not planned and scheduled. And if it is planned and scheduled, how often that conversation is pushed aside for something that is perceived to be more important. So that would be my first. The thing that I would suggest is that even though you might feel that this spontaneous ad hoc communication is working just fine for you, I would challenge that may not necessarily be giving you the greatest leverage from your executive assistant.

And it's sometimes. Having those, dedicating that time and having that time block of time in your diary is going to mean that there's space. That you might not otherwise be making available in terms of your mental energy for your AI that you might benefit from? I think the other thing that also is relevant to is it in this current environment where we're a lot of us are still continuing to work remotely and.

We don't have the benefit of those normal, spontaneous, tiniest, and ad hoc conversations that would happen if we were together in the office, being intentional around your communication is relevant across. Your across the board in terms of the way the leader is showing up, but very much in terms of being intentional around your communication with your AI is something to think about.

Pod: Okay. So first thing there is given the leader always has. Busy diaries schedule 15, 20 minutes, whatever the number is, but on a regular basis, as opposed to ad hoc, which is to both share, what's come up in a diary, but also to give maybe some enabled the EA to see around the corners as to what can happen.

Liz: as we said earlier, when we're talking about the three pays, and one of those is the priorities. So if we thinking about what are the big rocks. We know, we might've had a conversation around what the strategic priorities are, but they may have shifted and there might be nuances there yeah. Is actually not across.

So again, one of the things that I find with EAs that I coach and train is that not all of those EAs pre-vis they don't necessarily, there is an assumption. In some organizations and in some relationships that the EA has other more important things to do or more pressing things to do than to sit in a meeting with their executive.

But if possible, particularly those meetings that do. Pertain to the big rock priorities. I think there's real value to be had in exposing your AI to those meetings. So that they're actually hearing, not just the conversation, but the dynamics of the conversation and the nuances that go on in those meetings that.

Then not able to read between the lines when that's been communicated in some other format.

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Pod: I think that's a really insightful comment. There is, some of the most effective, CEO level leaders or just business level leaders that I've worked with over the years, they actively have an executive system to help in those meetings.

And it may well be that they're supporting the leader and the exec team along the way. So there are reasons for him to be there, but one of the outputs of that involvement is as you say, they pick up the nuances of the priorities and strategic rocks. They also pick up the timeline of those priorities and.

The enablement of that means that the exec assistant often looks at the diary of a leader to make sure the diary leader is aligned with the strategic priorities, which means they become judiciously guarding of that leader's diary to make sure that leader is focused on the priorities. Is that something that you've noticed.

Liz: And if we're talking about, one of the power skills that I talked to EAs about is assertiveness and assertiveness skills is, it is a balancing act. I describe it as a Seesaw that you've got assertiveness in the middle and you've got passive at one end and aggressive at the other, and it is a constant.

Act of balancing in the middle and it's about respectful communication. So if we're talking about protecting the leader's time and protecting the leader's priorities for the EA, what that actually looks and I've actually coached EAs around, this is actually being able to have assertive conversations with whether it's other people in the leadership team, other stakeholders to actually push back.

On requests for time to be able to communicate with them, that you understand that this is important to them, but that it does not work for the leader at, in the timeframe at that point. And that is a skill and a competency that's really important for an EA to develop so that they can, assertiveness then leads on to their ability to be influencing.

Without authority and getting, earning respect by being able to have those tricky conversations with people about protecting the leader's time and energy.

Pod: Great. Speaking of time, one question that I've regularly encouraged the leaders I work with. Who have a good relationship with their executive assistant or who's about to hire, an executive assistant.

And the question is, if I give you full control of my diary, how would you spend me 10 hours a week? And I've always been astounded as to the answers that come back, that the leader often didn't expect as the leader expected all, they will cut stuff out of my diary, but in fact, what has happened is the executive system is I can take stuff off you.

I can do this on your behalf or in advance for you, et cetera.

Liz: Absolutely. I'm dealing with an AI at the moment. That is actually happening in action in this current environment where we're working remotely, whether the leader is very



focused on doing a weekly communication with the, an Hans communication and the leader was investing time in their calendar, into meetings, working with the comms department about that.

What that was going to look like for the week reviewing the script. Walking through the various points, interacting with multiple people. And that was taking up time in their calendar. And the EA was able to see that I, it actually was taking up time in the calendar that the leader. Didn't need to be involved in that it could be done completely, separately that she could actually have those conversations because she knew what the key things were that needed to be communicated that week.

She had already had that conversation. She was already aware and across those things. So she was able to feed all of that back into the comms department with the leader, not being involved in it. Font doing a final scan and potentially picking up a couple of things, but effectively taking out what effectively was two hours a week of the leader sitting down with various people to get that script.

And that process executed. The other thing that I would say is a really simple way of finding time for the leader and giving them space that they might otherwise not even be, it might not even have on their radar is rather than blocking things in one hour blocks in the calendar, blocking them in 45 minute blocks so that you're immediately gifting them with the 15 minutes.

That they can have to have time for something else that they want to focus on in that 15 minutes. But it also gives other people a very clear indicator. It sets boundaries with other people that this leader does have 45 minutes available for me. I need to communicate with them what I want to communicate in that 45 minute block and that the AI is actually.

Enforcing this hard stop in terms of creating a pattern in the diary, that there is no expectation that it's an hour meeting, that it's a 45 minutes slot and you need to get done what you need to get done in that 45 minutes.

Pod: I love that idea and it ties into a white paper that we have on our website called the daily habits of exceptional leaders, which came from a study a number of years ago that I was involved with.

But one of the outputs of that study was there's many things, but one of them was that the really exceptional leaders have a very strong notion of managing their diary. In this case was two 45, 50 minutes, but I eat less than an hour, no matter what, that was. One thing, the second thing was they didn't go to meetings unless there was an agenda.

Already pre-prescribed. And when I interviewed the leaders who are deemed to be exceptional in this group, one of the things I noticed was this is a very subtle comment, but it came through and through that, once they realized for them to be efficient, the time. And scarcity time was the most important thing in their life because they'd been paid to think if

they haven't got enough time to think there really are, they're working at a level too low for their role.

So the time of the meetings became really important. Hence your comment about 45 minutes, the ongoing two meetings that only if there's an agenda in the invitation, cause then we know what we're here about. So we're not wasting time. But to your point, they delegated the policing of that to the executive assistants because that person was best placed to do that.

it's just off today. It sounds like for the leader, because again, they have the authority in this relationship more so than the other person, if they were just to take that simple notion of. Walking through here are my priorities. Here are my preferences here, my peeves. And then how can you help me maximize my diary?

So I have more thinking time that will be a great conversation.

Liz: Absolutely. And I think it would be, it would open the door. Two other conversations, because I think one of the things that AIS respond really well to is the leader actually giving them the sense that the leader is interested. In their input and in their observations.

And I describe EA's as little hinges that can swing big doors. And I think that is something that business leaders, and often HR, don't fully appreciate. They do see them as a commodity, as a replaceable commodity. Whereas, I see them as little hinges that can swing big doors. And if you strengthen those hinges, by investing in their power skills, by investing in, the things that are going to help them be effective, not just efficient, you're going to be building stronger little hinges that can swing much bigger doors.

Pod: that is such a metaphor to finish this conversation on well done.

There's a level. That I finished all my episodes with the same two questions. So I'd like to put the same two to you. If I could. The first one being now that you have accumulated all the experiences you have and the wisdom that comes with that, what would you tell that 35 year old version of yourself today?

Oh

Liz: my goodness. We've got another hour to have this conversation. What would I tell? I would tell the 35 year old me that. You know what I would tell the 35 year old me that I am. I am just great as I am, and I don't need to be anything else. I just need to be more.

Pod: And your favorite song, what would that be?

Liz: Goodness. Over the rainbow. Oh, yeah. Cause I used to sing it when my daughters were little. I used to sing it to them to put them to sleep.

Pod: Fabulous. Certainly put a link to that song.



So for anyone who wants to know more, my EA career.com is a website to go to. And anyone who wants to listen to a podcast, and they're specifically oriented to the work of executive assistance, 'Being indispensable' is the way to go. These blades. Thank you for joining this morning. So good to have you here.

Liz: Thank you for having me

Pod: hope you found that conversation with Liz. Helpful one or two nuggets and maybe one or two questions to ponder for me. As I said in that interview at Liz, I'm often astounded how little time leaders spend with their executive assistant. And if Liz is right in that, a great executive assistant is a little hinges, swing, big doors, then putting small bit of structure into the relationship, or at least a conversation can only be helpful.

Her notion of three P's. What are your preferences as a leader? What are your priorities and what are your pet peeves to my mind is a similar conversation as to a new leader, assimilation conversation that a leader often has with their team. The relationship between the leader and executive assistant is often a far more personal relationship than between the leader and their direct reports, not always.

But often these and therefore help being the executive assistant who sees your diary every single day, knows what you're up to, helping them to understand what are your priorities, your preferences, and your pet peeves can only be a good conversation. The other question that emerged in that interview, which I've often used with leaders to ask of their own exec assists and to, which is if I was to give you complete control of my diary, how would you save me time?

It's a great conversation to both help them develop in their ability to help you, but it often surfaces really unexpected outcomes and often very useful outcomes. So that's certainly a question to consider in your next conversation. Lastly, I think the, this conversation for me surfaced again, the importance of aligning your diary with your strategy and your priorities, and really looking at how do you set up your meetings?

The daily habits of exceptional leader study that are referred to in that interview. And indeed, as a white paper on the website for you to go and look at, if that's of interest made it really clear that in that particular study exceptional leaders, number one, only take invitations to a meeting. If there is an agenda or the decisions to be made are outlined.

And B their meetings typically are less than an hour. So typically around 20 to 25 minutes, or as Liz said, 45 to 50 minutes, and that often is enough. So how do you help your exec assistant to understand your preferences around your diaries and to make sure that your diary is aligned with your key process?

Lastly this whole podcast series is aimed at senior leaders, but senior leaders are only as effective as a team they have around them. So maybe it might be worth considering sharing



this episode with your exec assistant, who knows what conversations are thinking patterns might emerge as a result of that.

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