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MBS (00:00):

Have you ever done one of those trust falls? I'm not even sure that they're still a thing, actually I hope they're not still a thing, but in case you're not sure what I'm talking about. You stand up, you close your eyes and you let yourself fall backwards. In theory, and mostly in practice, the strong hands of your team catch you and support you. And in that moment, or at least so the idea goes, years of resentment, dissatisfaction with the underlying power structures and petty politics are washed away. We are all together united, all is golden. It's the same hokum that Tony Robins pedals with his fire walk, quite frankly. Now, at the heart of that version of trust-building is certainty. I know what's going to happen. I can trust the future. Now, I've just finished reading Margaret Heffernan's wonderful book, Uncharted, and there she makes the compelling case for the opposite, that navigating the future requires comfort with



uncertainty and ambiguity and big dreams rather than the fake reassurance of certainty and small dreams.

MBS ([01:13](#)):

So what's the role of confidence in this? If you're a leader, or a coach, or a parent, do you encourage people to fake it till they make it? Do you learn how to say, I'm not sure rather than bluffing it out? Is it vulnerability and anathema to confidence, or actually paradoxically foundational to it? Welcome to 2 Pages with MBS. This is the podcast where brilliant people read the best two pages from a favorite book, a book that has moved them, a book that has shaped them. I can introduce Rachel Botsman to you as an author who writes about trust, a lecturer at Oxford University, and a well-regarded keynote speaker, but those are just the resume things. Those aren't what define her.

Rachel ([02:04](#)):

My story is actually I think really defined by travel. So I have lived and worked on every continent now, I think, except Africa. I spent 10 years of my life in America and nine years of my life in Australia, but I would say without it sounding pretentious, I'm an artist, that's my training. I make things. I create content. I draw a lot.

MBS ([02:34](#)):

Rachel was educated at Harvard and Oxford. And with that type of runway, the expectation is always that you're taking off for a big job and a big career. You're wooed by firms who want to hire the best of the best. So Rachel took the bait, she went into consulting and strategy. And I have to tell you, this is a story I really relate to. She quickly learned that she wasn't very good at working within big systems.



Rachel ([02:59](#)):

I didn't really understand how large organizations worked. So I felt process and systems, and I love process and systems, but they trumped ideas, and that there wasn't a lot of tolerance or time for uncertainty and doubt. And there was a lot of doing and not a lot of thinking, even with people in strategy.

MBS ([03:26](#)):

I've been there. Every time I've tried to work with someone else, both them and I were left wondering, what is going on here? The experience left Rachel thinking the same.

Rachel ([03:37](#)):

I thought there was something probably slightly wrong with me that I couldn't, how do people go in nine to five? How are they so consistent? It didn't connect.

MBS ([03:49](#)):

All of this leaves Rachel a little bit between worlds, both an insider and an outsider. Someone with an impressive education pedigree, who is also an artist. A woman who is well-traveled, but not strongly assimilated anywhere. I asked her how her unique perspective feeds into her exploration of trust.

Rachel ([04:09](#)):

It has so many layers to it because I think it's, I've always looked at an external world of trust. So what is trust? Going on and trust on a macro level. Why do people say they don't trust institutions? Why do we feel that trust is in a state of decline? And then I flip and I look at that from an internal perspective, which is how do people feel towards their governments? How do entrepreneurs feel towards VCs? How do people on platforms feel towards each other? So I think if it was always external, the work would feel very different, and it's probably



becoming more and more insider, if you like, because my fascination has gone from trust in things and technology to trust in institutions and systems. And now it's very much about ourselves, what that really means, and trying to blow up a lot of myths and misconceptions around that, which is really, really fascinating.

MBS ([05:24](#)):

I want to dig into this, because there's a rich conversation waiting us, but tell us before we get there about the book you've chosen.

Rachel ([05:34](#)):

I struggled to pick a book, I should say, because I'm a nerd. I love reading, it's my thing. So it's probably not right to say this, I was going to pick *Black Swan*, and then I tried to pick two pages, and it's really hard, because it's densely brilliant, but you can't get it in two pages, that's the genius of it. So I picked *Quiet* by Susan Cain.

MBS ([05:59](#)):

Beautiful.

Rachel ([06:00](#)):

Yeah. And I actually loved the subtitle of her book, which is the power of introverts in a world that's, won't stop talking, and I've read this book when it first came out in 2012, and then I re-read the book a few months ago. And it was a totally different experience, which I thought was really interesting.

MBS ([06:19](#)):

When did the book, you read it when it first came out, what shifted in its impact from 2012 to now almost 10 years later, how did it's impact change for you?



Rachel ([06:32](#)):

So when I first read it, I think my response to it was self-identification. So like many readers, oh wow, this lens of introversion and extroversion, there's nothing new in that. It explains how I feel in so many situations. It explains where I get my energy from. It explains who I gravitate towards. It explains why I can be so comfortable on a stage and hate going to the dinner afterwards. So I think it was a self-identification. And it's not a selfish way to read the book, but it's quite surface level actually. And then when I went back and read it, I started making all these connections to my work and the way I see the world and what I'm trying to figure out. So actually, when you dig deeper into it, it's a beautiful book about humility. And it's a beautiful book challenging why we follow people who assert a certain type of confidence, and project certainty. And actually when you follow that vein through the book, it's far richer than, "Oh yeah, I'm an introvert."

MBS ([07:57](#)):

Right. That's interesting. Well, part of what I love about this podcast is watching people wrestle with the book they have to choose, there's so many books, and then the pages that they have to choose from that book that they've chosen. So which two pages have you chosen for us?

Rachel ([08:14](#)):

I've chosen two pages about her experience going to Harvard Business School and meeting a student called Don, and his experience explaining what happens in the Harvard Business School classroom.

MBS ([08:35](#)):

All right. Perfect. Well, let me do a formal little introduction. So Rachel Botsman, author of, *Who Can You Trust*, reading Susan Cain's brilliant book, *Quiet*. Rachel, over to you.



Rachel ([08:50](#)):

The essence of the Harvard Business School education is that leaders have to act confidently and make decisions in the face of incomplete information. The teaching method plays with an age-old question: If you don't have all the facts, and often you won't, should you wait to act until you've collected as much data as possible? Or, by hesitating, do you risk losing others' trust and your own momentum? The answer isn't obvious. If you speak firmly on the basis of bad information, you can lead your people into disaster. But if you exude uncertainty, then morale suffers, funders won't invest, and your organization can collapse. The HBS teaching method implicitly comes down on the side of certainty. The CEO may not know the best way forward, but she has to act anyway. The HBS students, in turn, are expected to opine. Ideally, the student who was just cold-called has already discussed the case study with his Learning Team, so he's ready to hold forth on the protagonist's best move.

Rachel ([10:04](#)):

After he finishes, the professor encourages other students to offer their own views. Half of the students' grade, and a much larger percentage of their social status, is based on whether they throw themselves into this fray. If a student talks often and forcefully, then he's a player; if he doesn't, he's on the margins. Many of the students adapt easily to the system, but not Don. He has trouble elbowing his way into class discussions. In some classes he barely speaks at all. He prefers to contribute only when he believes he has something insightful to add, or honest-to-God, disagrees with someone. This sounds reasonable, but Don feels as if he should be more comfortable talking, just so he can fill up his share of available airtime. Don's HBS friends, who tend to be thoughtful, reflective types like him, spend a lot of time talking about talking in class. How much class participation is too much? How little is too little? When does publicly disagreeing with a classmate constitute healthy debate, and when does it seem competitive and judgemental?



Rachel ([11:15](#)):

One of Don's friends is worried because her professor sent around an e-mail saying that anyone with real-world experience from the day's case study should let him know in advance. She's sure that the professor's announcement was an effort to limit stupid remarks like the one she made in class last week. Another worries that he's not loud enough. "I just have a naturally soft voice," he says, "so when my voice sounds normal to others, I feel like I'm shouting. I have to work on it." The school also tries so hard to turn quiet students into talkers. The professors have their own "Learning Teams," in which they egg each other on with techniques to draw out reticent students.

Rachel ([11:54](#)):

When students fail to speak up in class, it's seen not only as their deficit but also as their professor's. "If someone doesn't speak by the end of the semester it's problematic," Professor, I think it's Michele Anteby told me. "It means I didn't do a good job." The school even hosts live informational sessions and web pages on how to be a good class participator. Don's friend earnestly reel off the tips they remember best. "Speak with conviction. Even if you believe something only 55%, say it as if you believe it a hundred percent." "If you're preparing alone for class, then you're doing it wrong. Nothing at HBS is intended to be done alone." "Don't think about the perfect answer. It's better to get out and say something than never to get your voice in." The school's newspaper also dispenses advice, featuring articles with titles like, "How to Think and Speak Well On the Spot," "Developing Your Stage Presence," and "Arrogant or Simply Confident."

MBS ([13:00](#)):

And Rachel, you said earlier on that you were never one to play the game. What strikes you about that section and that passage in particular?



Rachel ([13:10](#)):

So I think it strikes me, this goes to the insider outsider actually, it strikes me as a student and now being on the other side. So being the lecturer. So I actually took classes at Harvard Business School, and you go one, two, three, and I failed because I couldn't participate in this way. And I just became more enthralled at observing the performance, also totally horrified. And then I think later on then really writing about what happened in the financial crisis, and what happens when trust is lost in epic ways. I could see it all there in that classroom, in that dynamic, in that culture, and that it was fascinating, but it probably filled me with fear.

Rachel ([14:12](#)):

So I think I can really relate to what Don is saying as a student, but now what's happened is because I'm on the other side, I was one of the first faculty that said no to class participation, it will not be the way I grade my students. And other faculty members said, "Rachel, you're crazy, the students aren't going to show up because they don't need to participate." And I said, "Well, then shame on me, because if they don't want to come and learn [crosstalk 00:14:48]."

MBS ([14:47](#)):

Then truly I'm not doing my job. Yeah.

Rachel ([14:49](#)):

Yeah. And what's really interesting was that the first year I went along with hospice position, I'm now in my fifth or sixth year of teaching, I am way more comfortable with silence in the classroom. I don't force anyone to speak, but I think my biggest learning as a teacher is feeding out when someone has something to say and they just can't speak versus people who are just reflective and thinking. And this relates so much to trust and humility, because one of my



pet peeves is when we conflate confidence with capability and competence, it's such an old fashioned way of looking at the world.

MBS ([15:42](#)):

What do you mean by humility? And what is it's connection to trust?

Rachel ([15:49](#)):

So the way I define humility is it's actually a space rather than a skill. And I define it as a confident relationship with what we don't know.

MBS ([16:07](#)):

That's so good.

Rachel ([16:08](#)):

So to have humility, you have to be able to sit with uncertainty. You have to be curious about doubts. And the confident pieces is really important. And then the way it relates to trust is, I guess trust is the bubble, if you like, around it. It's what holds that space, whether it's trust in yourself or trust in a team or organization, because I define trust as a confident relationship with the unknown. So you can see how those they're like brother and sister. Yeah.

MBS ([16:50](#)):

I got a lot of cards dealt to me in life. So I'm a smart overeducated, straight, tall white guy. So, I have no problem with going, I'm an authority on everything. And the learning for me and for people like me probably, is this idea of step away from what you think you know, and step towards what you don't know and gain the humility to be in that place. And it is a lessening of my status and my privilege in that act, and it's a powerful act for me and for others in doing that, I suspect. What if you have less privilege and actually you're trying to gain status, how do you navigate between the sense of, look, I'm actually trying to be



heard and be seen and be known for something, knowing that, playing that game of pretend is a separate game.

Rachel ([17:58](#)):

It's such a timely and layered and complicated question. I would start with you maybe, and challenge some of the language that you used around that. So I don't think thinking in this way takes you away from status, I think it takes you away from ego, and they are very different things. So I think we're only starting to see it, but just to give an example like Gareth Southgate, you often need a cultural icon for people to get what you're talking about. And yes, England didn't win the European Cup, but a lot of fans said they let go of the loss a lot easier because they were very proud of his leadership style. And I thought it was credible that even in the pages like The Sun, they were talking about his humility.

MBS ([19:02](#)):

Right. And as a translation, Gareth Southgate, the manager of the English soccer football team, and The Sun, typically a bit of a right wing paper, who's more of an attack dog newspaper rather than a thoughtful newspaper.

Rachel ([19:18](#)):

That's putting it kindly, but yeah, yeah. Sorry. The transition map, but this is really significant because English football, it's all been about aggression and assertiveness, and we will win. And he never promised that, but his status hasn't changed. I would say he's probably one of the most admired leaders in the UK right now. But to your question, I do think it's interesting when it comes from someone and it could be gender, it could be race, it could be socioeconomic background. It could be education. It could be the way it sounds. So another sports example that's coming to mind is what happened with Simone Biles in the Olympics. Now, that was actually a display of humility, it was vulnerability, but it was also humility. There was something she didn't understand that was



going on, she didn't know at the time how this announcement would affect her career. And I think certain people would have been celebrated as a hero, but it was very divisive. There were people that said she is weak. She shouldn't have represented America. She's not on Olympic athletes.

MBS ([20:46](#)):

She's betraying her team, somebody said she was a psychopath. Yeah.

Rachel ([20:53](#)):

I only want to work on things that run very deep in society and that are not easy, but where you can see that if we created a cultural shift around notions of confidence and notions of knowing and being certain, how that could change so many things in our lives. So I think it's worth exploring, writing about and fighting for.

MBS ([21:25](#)):

It feels to me that the people can easily equate trust with confident in other person, the fact that they know stuff. We love experts on TV going this, this, this, and this, even though there's all that research that says the more expert they are on TV, the more likely they are to be wrong. How do you help people have the courage to say, I'm not sure, or I don't know, or why don't you tell me what you think first?

Rachel ([22:00](#)):

Well, first of all, the research shows, and if you haven't read, you should read Adam Grant's book, Think Again, because he dives very deeply into this, that actually when experts admit what they do know and what they don't know, it actually only boosts their credibility. The same thing happens with trust. So I look a lot around the notion of competence. And when you say what you can do, so when you say what you can't do, as much as what you can do, that is rocket fuel for trust. So it's getting out of this language of doing, and being able,



and always having answers. What I would call the positive traits, and more into negative spaces, which are not depressing or weaknesses. So I would say if you, it's like anything, so I think with my students, one of the first things I say is, humility is really important in the culture of my classroom. I want you to feel comfortable with saying, I don't know, I'm not sure, please don't pretend that you have an answer. It's so easy to say, I have to role model that really early on.

Rachel ([23:12](#)):

So if someone asked me a question and I don't know it, I won't fluff it. Now, it's a balance, because if that comes too early, they're like, who's the shonky person [crosstalk 00:23:29].

MBS ([23:28](#)):

Yeah. Exactly.

Rachel ([23:28](#)):

... trust. Do you know what I mean? She may not be a global expert and she don't know my first question. So again, it's that balance of the moment too, and not doing it in a dramatic way, in a very genuine. So I think that's the first thing. And then I think the second thing is just, I always say to friends that are really struggling to make a change in their life, or that you know they want to let go of something, what do you get by feeling like you're in control? What do you get by this need for certainty? Where have, in your life, the most interesting things happened?

MBS ([24:16](#)):

Nice. What do they say to the answer to those first questions? What do you get from this need for control and certainty. What do you hear?



Rachel ([24:23](#)):

Stability, order. I'm naturally quite a warrior and an anxious person. So I can relate to this that, and there's lots and lots of different layers to uncertainty and the unknown, but it's much easier to live life on the other side of the line until you discover that the meaning, or the order was fabricated, or a lie, or is very, very fragile. And I think that unravels people. So don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that we should all live in a constant state of humility, but there's so much work to be done in this self-help advice of never doubt yourself.

MBS ([25:14](#)):

This conversation between us, Rachel, has talked about this work, feeling like individual work. It's like, how do you see yourself? How do you find the line between a grounded confidence and a humility, but we all exist in context, and you and I both have worked for big consulting firms where knowledge and status and I'm being paid for the stuff that I know. Do you have any insight on whether organizations can reboot around some of these concepts, because organizations love certainty and clarity and authority and knowledge and stability, organizations love that. Are they fixable, or is there just not a way that organizations can evolve?

Rachel ([26:08](#)):

I think, and again, I'm not saying those things are bad things. It's when we overweigh, or place too much value on them. And so I would say most organizations that's their culture, that's their processes, even think when you study trust, you have to really understand risk. And the number of, and we saw this a lot around the pandemic that, took risk where in some way you can try to predict the likelihood of something, or the severity of something. And they conflated that with uncertainty. So my advice to organizations is if you give 5% of this up, just 5%, or give permission to people to think more, to write, I will



say, do your people write to-don't list as well as to-do lists? Do they think of the things they need to take away to create more space?

Rachel ([27:07](#)):

What would happen? How could you bring that in to certain teams, in certain meetings? And I find it interesting that it hasn't really been spoken enough in terms of creativity and innovation and discovery, even if you think about the culture and the business language around that, it's processes, we like convergent and divergent thinking for brainstorming. What was the famous, oh, it's totally gone out my... The Lean Startup, where there's a methodology. So it's [crosstalk 00:27:52].

MBS ([27:51](#)):

It's structural, the spontaneity, as best we can.

Rachel ([27:55](#)):

Yeah. So if there was a bit more mess, which is people in life, what would happen? And I think what's really powerful, I talk about this idea of pulls and pushes. So what pulls you back to the known and what pushes you into the unknown? Just becoming culturally aware as an organization, what always pulls your people back to the safe and the familiar and the known, and what would take them into the unknown? And that's where it really connects with trust, because if the trust isn't there in the culture and the teams and the leaders, they will stay in that safe, familiar place.

MBS ([28:35](#)):

I love this conversation, Rachel. So thank you. It's been [crosstalk 00:28:38].

Rachel ([28:37](#)):

Pleasure.



MBS ([28:38](#)):

Yeah, it's been really rich. I'm at this crossroads going, do I just carry on for another five hours, or do I need to wrap this up? And I'm like, I'm going to wrap it up, because you're a busy woman. I'm less busy, but I'll try to pretend I am. What needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in this conversation?

Rachel ([29:00](#)):

I think there's two things. It's something I've become aware of, and I think it's, I've really tuned in to the number of clients, people on social media, my students, can you teach me how to think differently? And I hear it over and over again. So, you're like, where is this coming from? And it made me very aware of how much content I consume that is about telling me what to think, not teaching me how to think. And honestly, it's been such a, I always think there's like these lens shifts where you're like, okay, is this another what to think thing, or is this really a how to think thing? So I think becoming aware of that can be really powerful.

MBS ([29:54](#)):

It's a twist on emotional intelligence. I always think of emotional intelligence as being able to see yourself in the moment and ask how's this going, and do I need to adjust anything to make it work better for me and for them? And there's a way you're seeing the way that you're thinking and you're going, how am I thinking about this? And is there a way I need to adjust this that might be better for me and for the situation at hand?

Rachel ([30:20](#)):

Yeah. And then I think the second thing I'd say is, and this is a fairly recent realization as someone that grew up thinking of capability as things that you acquire, like I was a competitive swimmer. I wanted to do really well in the exam, these were skills that you get better and better at. And it took me actually



a long time, and it took me the experience of being on stage over and over and over again, to think of capability actually as the capacity to hold space. So I know people I like being around and great leaders, great performers, they hold space. You do this right. And they integrate interview, it does that hold space. And so again, it's just one of those things that you can ask yourself as like, am I fixated on these hard skills of capability that are about acquisitions and measurements and awards, and how much space do I hold, or do I give myself to think differently about things?

MBS ([31:39](#)):

Rachel's definition of humility is a little different from mine, and I think really useful. For me, humility is knowing a little bit more about yourself so that you can see who you are, the light and the dark, with more nuance, with more ownership. Rachel talked about it being a space rather than a skill. And I love that idea, a space rather than a skill. And it's about being able to sit with uncertainty, to be curious about doubts. And that's brilliant, to be curious about doubts. That's real work. To sit with that is going to take you to more interesting place than a trust fall, or a fire walk. If you enjoyed the conversation with Rachel, and I hope you did. I've got two other suggestions for you. First, Matthew Barzun, author of, *How to Give Power Away*. His episode is called, *What to Do With Power*, and I love that chat with him.

MBS ([32:34](#)):

And Jennifer Paler, who's led coaching at IBM and Capgemini, her episode is called, *Trust is the Key*. Rachel can be found at rachelbotsman.com. Her Instagram is great, but her LinkedIn newsletter is her main focus. And you can sign up to that from her site. Many thanks for listening to this. I always appreciate you coming to the end of the interview with me. Thank you if you've managed to give the interview a rating on your podcast app. Thank you if you've joined us at the Duke Humphreys, that's the free membership site, you can access at mbs.works and the podcast page there. You get access to unreleased



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