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MBS (00:00):

Hey, it's Michael here, and my new book is on the near, near horizon. It's called *How to Work with (Almost) Anyone*. And if you interact with other human beings in your life, this might be a helpful book for you. It goes live on June 27 and I've got some terrific pre order bonuses. You'll find those at bestpossiblerelationship.com. I do hope you'll check those out. The audiobook is ready to go as well. I've actually recorded it myself. I did it sitting in this office where I'm recording this voiceover now. And so that it's not just a monologue from me, I've invited some of my friends to share a short story of what they've learned from their best or their worst working relationships.

(00:48):

In this episode, you're going to hear about one of the five questions of the Keystone Conversation, the central tool at the heart of this book, and this



question is called the *Bad Date Question*. Then Jennifer McCollum, who's the CEO of Linkage, which is a SHRM company, shares a story that builds delightfully on that very question.

(01:12)

Chapter 5. *The Bad Day Question: What can you learn from frustrating past relationships?* Netflix's *Stranger Things* didn't just bring the Upside Down and all its attendant horrors. It made Dungeons and Dragons cool for a new generation. I'm of the old generation. I started playing D&D in my teens, and my friends and I would play weekend long games with the occasional breaks for backyard cricket.

(01:41):

When a tournament came to town, we entered the competition and we slayed (literally and metaphorically). I mean, we were untouchable. Whenever we shot an arrow, it would kill not one ORC but three. When we needed to roll a 100 -a 1 percent chance- we did that and unlocked the Big Secret that ensured our victory. It was glorious. Twelve months later, the tournament came around again. We hadn't played in the ensuing year -pressures of schoolwork, trying to get a date, etc., etc.- but we still had our swagger from last year's success.

(02:16):

This was an utterly different experience. Our Dungeon Master was not so easily charmed/bullied as the previous one had been. We started badly (significant damage from an ambush in the first four minutes), we staggered around the corner to be wounded by a Gelatinous Cube. And finally we expired when the booby-trapped flagstone unleashed a thunderstorm of crossbow bolts. We'd been playing for exactly eighteen minutes, and we were out of the tournament.



(02:51):

It Starts Bad and Goes Downhill. The small mercy was that at least our D&D death was a quick one. The same can't be said of some working relationships. You know how this goes. You arrive hopeful. You're excited to start off down the path together. But for some reason, it begins badly and only gets increasingly messy, difficult, confusing, and frustrating as time goes on. But those past experiences are now a rich source of wisdom. They show you what conditions you need to flourish and more juicily the ways you behave badly to undermine and sabotage relationships. That's why the fourth question in the Keystone Conversation is the flip side of the third: What can you learn from frustrating past relationships?

(03:50):

The Power of the Bad Date Question. Some of the most valuable pieces of “intel” you can share in the Keystone Conversation are details of past working relationships that have been a struggle. The instinct is to cover them up or blame the other party for the mess, but doing so is a mistake. Yes, the other person played their role. But you were part of that dynamic as well. The experience likely felt deeply personal and unique -which it was- but at the same time, it also expressed a repeating pattern. The details you uncover will offer clues to recurring dynamics that you might want to avoid or at least actively manage this time around. There's, “wisdom in the wound.” Examine your behavior, their behavior and the situation, and see what you can learn from those past difficult experiences.

(04:48):

Here's the core exercise for the Bad Date Question. It's called *How Did You Break It?* This is the alter-ego exercise to *How Did You Build It?* in the previous chapter. In that exercise, I asked first what *they* did and then what *you* did to counteract the human tendency to take more than our due credit for the good things. Now,



to manage the flipside bias to assign more blame to the others than to yourself when things go bad. Let's start with you taking your share of the “credit” for this mess. What did you say (and also not say)? What words and silences caused damage? What did you do (and also not do)? What small and big actions undermined any good intentions? How did you “be”? How did you show up in a way that soured dynamics? But not only you made it hard. Don't take all the blame. How did the other party contribute to the mess? What did they say (and also not say)? What got you angry or frustrated or sad? What did they do (and also not do)? What actions set things back? How did they “be”? What qualities did they exhibit that, frankly, sucked? Finally, it wasn't only you and them. The time and place always influenced what happens. What do you notice here about context? What about the context made this odds-against? What other people played a role? Which moment tested the relationship, a moment you failed to navigate and that was particularly damaging? What light does that shed?

(06:42):

So here's a moment for you to take and pause and answer the Bad Date Question: What can you learn from frustrating past relationships? If you're wanting to go deeper, there are two exercises in the Know Your Stuff section. One is called, What Do People Get Wrong About You? And the second is called, Claim Your Villain. And of course, there are the downloads at bestpossiblerelationship.com, a template to answer the five questions, and some other resources there as well.

Jennifer (07:15):

I'm Jennifer McCollum, CEO of Linkage, now a SHRM company. I've been building and growing leadership development firms for more than 20 years. So, when I had the opportunity in one of my previous jobs to lead a 100 million dollar product line in one of the world's largest leadership firms, I jumped at the



chance. I thought it would be the last job I ever took. Sadly, it ended up being the worst job I ever had because my working relationship with my manager -we'll call him Tony- it was just so toxic. He was the head of the product organization. It was a brand new, large business unit. I was so excited. I couldn't wait to jump right in and demonstrate value.

(08:00):

Now, it's important to know that Tony had not hired me directly. Instead, it was his boss who was my executive sponsor. We'll call him Simon. I'd worked with Simon before. He had lured me in with the promise of building something big together from the ground up. You know, Tony resented me from the start, and many promises in the hiring process did not come to fruition. Things like the role itself, a full team of direct reports, even my title.

(08:31):

But what was even more difficult was the void. There was no onboarding, little direct communication, no feedback, no sense of community. And Simon, my protector, my executive sponsor, left the company shortly after I started. So I had nowhere to turn for support. I tried to build relationships with my peers and reach out across business units to demonstrate my expertise. I took the initiative to lead cross-functional projects that I felt would build trust and credibility with Tony. But he was more concerned about managing up to secure his own future with his new boss. He was not interested in engaging his own direct reports, and certainly not me.

(09:20):

After six months, I was really shaken right to my core. I found myself without purpose. I was questioning my self-worth, but I refused to quit. Instead, I was laid off shortly thereafter, which was perfect. I got to keep my signing bonus. And here's what I learned. I learned what I needed in order to be a fully



committed and engaged team member, regardless of whether I'm the leader. I need to honor and value the uniqueness that each team member brings.

(09:54):

I need to do my part to ensure *they* feel a sense of belonging. And that means checking myself. Am I operating with full transparency, authenticity, a little bit of vulnerability? And am I creating the environment for them to do the same?

MBS (10:13):

I'm so delighted you've had a taste of *How to Work with (Almost) Anyone*. For more information and bonus resources, go to bestpossiblerelationship.com. If you've got a chance to pick up the book and read it, a review on Amazon or an online source would be fantastic. Thank you for your support of the podcast and of the books. You're awesome and you're doing great.