

DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

SESSION 159

BUILDING BUY-IN FOR THE VALUE OF RISK

WITH WILL DENNIS

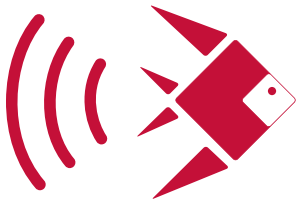
BETH: Hello, this is Beth Brodovsky, and welcome to Driving Participation. Today I have Will Dennis with me. Will is the manager of the Prep Fund for St. Joe's Prep, which is a private high school here in Philadelphia, and Will and I connected a little while back over his background in improv and how that connects with the work that he's doing, and I just thought it was such a fascinating concept that I really wanted to bring Will on to talk a little bit about this idea of the risks that you take and that you need to learn to take in order to really be effective in communications. So, Will, thanks so much for joining me today.

WILL: Oh, thanks for having me, Beth. It's great to be with you.

BETH: I want to start us off by talking a little bit about the work that you do at The Prep, and managing a fund isn't an ordinary thing that people think of when it comes to communications, but in the work that you do, what kind of participation matters to you? What are you guys looking for in a way that helps you sustain the organization?

WILL: Yeah, that's a great question, and in my role specifically, we're looking for those obvious things of new donors and all of that fun pyramid of giving that we're all familiar with. I think when we look at participation more broadly or holistically, I think what we really want to see is the evangelization, and I don't mean like Billy Graham on Sunday morning, but that idea that it's an active participation so that the work is being done for us as far as promoting the brand and the mission of the school, and when you're in a mission-based work like most nonprofits are, that's the most valuable thing that we've found, is putting other people in the position to be these evangelists for us and to talk about their involvement and then that grows on participation. So I don't want to discredit the





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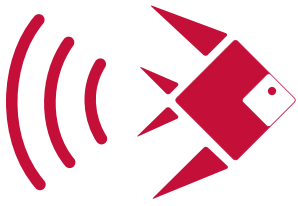
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value of things, like new donors and annual donors and major gifts. All of those things are important, but deeper than that, the most important thing for us is the sustainability that comes when people are empowered as donors and they feel active participation. Not just the passive participation that sometimes we become used to and we get numb to. So it's really about cultivating relationships. Right, that's everything. The whole world is about relationships so that sounds a little pat, but that really is the participation we're looking for here at The Prep.

BETH: It's so true, and that's a lot of what I'm learning through all these discussions I'm having with people is what's the difference between a transaction and something that is deeper in a way that helps you really, really thrive and what is that? What does that deeper thing look like? For you guys, when you say "evangelism," and I know, don't get freaked out by that everyone. You mean ambassadorship. You mean taking on the organization as their own and then spreading that message out there into the world. So for you guys, what does that actually look like?

WILL: Yeah, I think it looks like where we started and where I'm seeing it the most is we're taking, well you would consider sort of a standard like membership organization within our donors that offers some sort of value back to our donors and in exchange, there's an expectation. There's a threshold of giving that's there and then they get access. So all of a sudden they have a seat at the table. So specifically I've been working with some of our young alums and this is really where I see it the most because many of them are falling into the dreaded character of millennial, which has become a bad word, but it's not. It's just a group of people who think differently, interact differently and have different expectations. So we're giving them a seat at the table to help shake the strategy of the school, to help influence some of the leadership team and sort of the direction they want to go and as a result, they always say "what can I do for you" and of course the number one thing is always referrals. Give me names of someone else who might be interested in something like this, but the second





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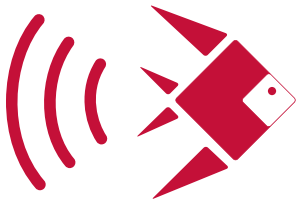
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thing I always say is “talk about this when you’re at the bar.” Talk about the fact that I’m involved at the Prep doing this new thing. Look at The Prep. They care about their young alums. They’re trying to re-engage us and this is how I’m doing it and then I don’t need the referrals because people are calling me and they say, “Hey, I heard about this thing. How can I be a part of it?” So that’s sort of as far as that dissemination of that message you were talking about, that’s where I’m seeing it and we have different memberships. So there’s a group that’s specifically for parents and then there’s a group for more established alums and it really is, these things are sort of bigger models, but they come out of this idea, which is just talk to people where they are. You can’t talk to a young alum the same way that you talk to maybe a guy that graduated in ‘65 or ‘66 and you can’t talk to any alum the same way you talk to a parent. So it’s that idea of segmentation specifically with message and communication and then if you do that well, then you’re also sort of turning over tools to those people to be the best messengers or ambassadors for both your brand and your mission.

BETH: Right. You know, it’s funny. I talk a lot about this idea of segmentation and speaking personally to different audiences. We talk a lot about really understanding your audience focus and who those people are and what they want. How are you guys managing that? You’re not a huge team and people often, the push back is again we don’t have the capacity to really be segmented or communicate in a way that targets each of our individual audiences. How are you guys handling it?

WILL: Yeah, so I think the best way we’ve been handling it so far is we’re going out more and having one on one conversations. That’s the start for us and we’re trying to do things very differently than we’ve done in the past. There’s a lot of new members of our team. There’s new leadership and our Chief Development Officer, Betsy Courtney, she’s very fond of saying there’s no money behind your desk. So while in my role it’s very important that I sort of am behind my desk to a certain extent, I have to create sort of those broader messages and email campaign and direct mail campaign and things like that where we are starting





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and it really is in its infancy stages of being able to control the message and the segmentation is in this one on one conversations because that's how you learn too. We have a major gift offer that goes out as a conversation and we're now in the head of a guy who stayed local, graduated in '66, is in the business field and has a giving history of maybe \$200-\$500 every year that we're able to grow into a major gift. We know what that person is thinking, what their point of view is because we had the conversation with them.

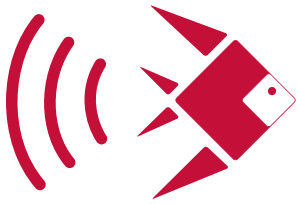
BETH: That's such a huge thing. People are always like, "We want to send a survey out." No. If you want to look at every one of those donor conversations as a persona developing interview so that you can start to understand, I know what this person likes, but what do other people who are like him probably like?

WILL: Right, exactly and don't get me wrong. It's a dichotomy of trying to use, for me and my background and we'll get into that, I'm so much more drawn to the anecdotal type of evidence than a survey response. There's value to trends and things like that, but I always get frustrated with trends because as soon as you figure it out, it's changed. I put so much more trust in sitting across the table with someone and having coffee or lunch with them and then figuring out what that needs for a broader base than I do a survey that someone probably didn't want to fill out in the first place, felt obligated to and then is only giving you answers based on a scale from 1-5. How much can you really learn about a person?

BETH: Right, and those things are really great when you have a very large audience and you want to see general trends and where things are today, but the challenge with a lot of trends and reporting on stuff, that tells you where people were and where they are. It doesn't really tell you where they want to go, but talking to them does.

WILL: Exactly, and this goes back to sort of my own personal philosophy, too, is like if you can have the conversation, have the conversation. We've become so entrenched in data and getting data as quickly as possible and what the data tells





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us and our smart phones can do everything that we've all forgotten how to just have a conversation and then learn what that person is telling us. Learn what the sub-text is even of the conversation.

BETH: Right. You and I were just even saying that we met initially when you took a class that I did, and I sent a survey at the end of that that you did not respond to and when I picked up the phone and called you, I remembered you saying to me, "This is great. I'm happy to have a conversation with you, but I'm never filling out your survey."

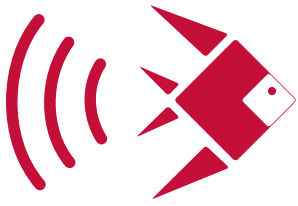
WILL: Right. I'm so much more, I appreciated that so much that you called, and I know you didn't call everyone. Right.

BETH: You can't, and it's hard. As much as I am like a raging extrovert, it's still also hard to pick up the phone and call somebody and ask them to talk to you. I can imagine how hard it must be for you guys, but everything, sales is really just about building relationships and whether it's sales or development or whatever, it all starts out with finding out what people are interested in.

WILL: Yeah, and you hit it on the head. I think sales, development, anything in this world is about building relationships because when you think about it, we spend most of our lives wanting to be in a relationship, until we are. Not to say we don't want to be in one when we're there, but we've achieved it. It's that idea of inclusion. I always talk to students in improv classes or any classes about to some extent we need to give ourselves permission to still be that insecure 13- or 14-year-old who just wants to belong and fit in because that doesn't go away. We just get better at hiding it.

BETH: Because nobody wants, you said that and all I can think of is "Oh my gosh, the last thing in the world I want to do is go back to being the awkward 13-year-old that wants to fit in."





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WILL: Right, exactly.

BETH: It's still there!

WILL: Of course it's still there! I mean, it's so formative in who we are now. We've just gotten better at either pretending it doesn't exist or hiding it or presenting it differently. I'll tell you right now, a driving force in my life is feeling like I belong somewhere and that is where, especially mission-based institutions and nonprofits have an advantage. You're working from a mission so I think a huge part of the communication and the development and the participation is recognizing that all of those people out there will be more active and participate more if they feel like they belong.

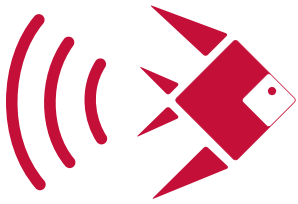
BETH: Exactly, and I noticed even when you talked about the people that participate in your fund, you used the word "members," and I struggle a lot with that word because it's a word that I use, but not everybody across the nonprofit spectrum thinks of the people that are in their bucket, in their world as members. You know, they might think of them as students or donors or volunteers or whatever and I think of them all as members because members means that you're somebody that you've gathered together who are active and involved with you because they feel like they're connected.

WILL: Yeah, and it means we're on the same team, too.

BETH: Yeah, exactly.

WILL: And it is, I've been reading lately and a lot of articles are talking about the shift in the world of development, but I think because beyond that too of like it used to be and I think we even got a chance to talk about this, Beth, the old idea of like you give because you felt like you had to versus giving because you're invested and giving because you feel passionately about something. Well, if somebody is a member of a team, they're gonna feel a little bit more invested and passionate because they're helping to drive the ship as opposed to I write





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this check every June 1 because I feel obligated. That's not a member, that's somebody who is disengaged, but writes a check anyway.

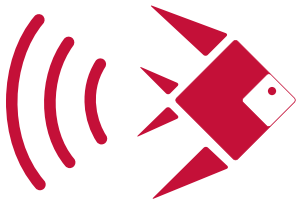
BETH: Right. It's so interesting, but starting to shift how you think about the people that are funding your goals, your mission, what you want to do is often a challenge for organizations and many people, especially organizations that have a long time in existence or just sort of certain practice around the way they had to do things, it can be hard to move them into new ways of thinking, which is where this idea of starting to cultivate an environment where you get a little more comfortable when risk starts to come in. Why don't you talk a little bit about your very neat background and how you have started to learn to think about risks?

WILL: Sure. I'll tell the shortest version possible here as far as this trajectory and how I landed where I am now. So I spent most of my adult life, my career, in theater as an actor, as primarily as an improviser and teaching improvisation and perks had always been from the beginning that I wanted to teach improvisation, not necessarily as a performance skill set, but as a life skill set. I saw these values in improv that connected very closely actually with the values of Jesuit education and I'm a product of eight years of Jesuit education. So when I learned these sort of core tenants of improv, I went, "Wow, that connects so deeply to who I am as a human even more than just a performer." So even the work I was doing as a "actor," not improviser, I felt myself gravitating more towards things that had that room for spontaneity, which is terrific, which is the way that I like to work and it's not for everyone. So I started there and then teaching and my classes got incredibly successful and predominantly I teach classes out of Act II Playhouse in Ambler.

BETH: Which is in Pennsylvania.

WILL: In Pennsylvania, and the classes had gotten successful and one of my students said to me, "Hey, over the summer because there's no classes, would you ever be interested in sort of coming to a private party and almost serving as





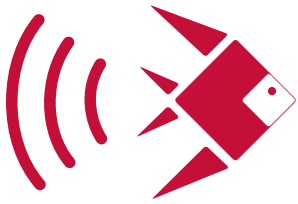
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the entertainment, to run an improv class?” Of course, when you hear someone say, “Can you come to a party and be the entertainment,” the first thing that comes to my mind is a clown at a kid’s party. So it’s like fear first and then clarification, but it was like no. We enjoy this so much. If we had folks over I think other people would enjoy it so I was like, “Yeah, absolutely I’d be happy to do it.” So I did a number of those, and one of the ones that I was running, one of the guests happened to be Betsy Courtney, who was just hired as the chief development officer here at St. Joe’s Prep. So I didn’t think anything of it. It was a blast and then a few weeks later I got an email from Betsy saying, “Would you be open to having a conversation? I think you might have an interesting skill set that we don’t often see in our field and I think it could be of great benefit to St. Joe’s Prep.” So me in my life, there’s really only one place that sort of when they call and say would you consider throwing away everything you’ve been doing and drop everything and come join our team, you say, “Yes,” and that’s St. Joe’s Prep. So I did end up saying yes and leaving, I had been working at Philadelphia Theater Company in downtown Philadelphia and I left my post there to join the development here at St. Joe’s Prep. The rest, so to speak, is sort of history, but I think it’s important to acknowledge like not only is risk ingrained in me, but I think there is a huge risk that The Prep took in bringing me on and saying like this person might not have the skill set of familiarity with our database, but they have the skill set that I don’t think we might be able to teach as quickly as well as Will is going to be able to learn software. Even in the conversation I was having, I was like, “Yeah, I’m a young enough guy that I’m confident that I’ll be able to learn software.” They took a chance.

BETH: That’s so huge. I guess I think that is a big part of the story, which is important for you to tell that background because it’s hard to take risks or become a culture of risk-taking organizations if you don’t have any support, any ability to do that internally right now and so I’m curious. What do you think it was about Betsy that made her say, yeah, we’re gonna try this? You’re right. Most people, I mean I feel like we’re living in a world today where people are looking for someone’s college degree to match the job title exactly.





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WILL: And it never happens.

BETH: It never happens. For years, the first couple of years I did this podcast, the question I asked everyone coming into it was “How did you wander into this world?” and I’ve heard everything, but I’m pretty sure “I was an actor” is the biggest stretch, like on paper seeming like the biggest stretch and it’s so fascinating to see how Betsy saw something and wanted to cultivate this new thinking into the organization.

WILL: Yeah, and I think, I mean I like to make pretend that I can take all the credit for it. It must have been the best improv session ...

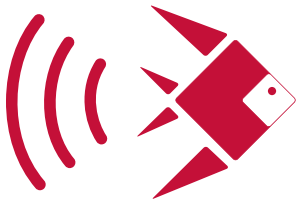
BETH: Best show ever.

WILL: Right. She was just moved and a conversion took place, but no. I think she has a tremendous amount of vision and I think she’s, you know in improvisation, some of the biggest things they teach us is the idea of coming from a big place of yes or anyone who has ever taken an improv class will know the phrase, “Yes, and,” which means to accept and build. That’s really all it is, but it’s counter cultural right now. I mean we live in a world where I would argue a majority of people, especially in the corporate world, are coming of a place of “No.” It’s much easier to say no first and then have someone try to convince you of something than to be willing to start with yes and you may end up at no. That is totally fine if you end up at no, but what you’re saying is like “Yeah, let’s take this idea out and see if it has legs, so to speak,” and that’s improv. You can’t be successful in improv if you come from a place of “no,” and I think that’s a wonderful sort of core tenet to take into any workplace because even if you think of it from a personal level, like think of what it feels viscerally when someone says no to an idea of yours versus when someone embraces it or accepts it because ...

BETH: You can physically feel it in your body.

WILL: Right, and it wears you down. That’s not good for anyone and I do think





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like if people in positions of leadership and people who are steering the boat so to speak would embrace this idea of starting from a place of yes, I think the benefits would be overwhelming in the long run to them and the productivity because you're creating a creative space whereas when you say no, you're creating a space of punching a clock and sitting in a cubicle and just doing the work that's expected of you and then leaving at 5 o'clock and going home to your family.

BETH: And there's so much of a culture of that in lots of places everywhere.

WILL: Yeah, exactly and it's all over and it goes even further in yes and ultimately needs to, the idea that there are no mistakes.

BETH: That's a huge thing to bring into any workplace at any time, especially when a young place that has young people that are getting trained.

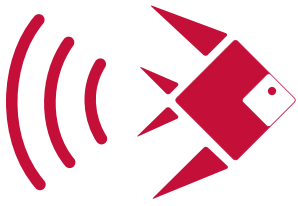
WILL: Yeah, and it's absolutely for young people getting trained. I mean, absolutely. The freedom that comes with...

BETH: Environment.

WILL: Right, and it is. I mean the next step is not only that there are no mistakes, but the mistakes are actually opportunities. You see it in improv all the time. Like it's the easiest place to see it because if something goes wrong, but then a greater "scene" comes out of that something goes wrong, which is wonderful. A lot of times the best, most organic and alive moments in improvisation comes from what we would deem a mistake in the real world and it's not. It becomes this glorious, glorious opportunity.

BETH: That's such a great attitude. It's funny. Just a couple of weeks ago I recorded, it was episode 153 with Anika Rahman, and we talked a lot about this idea of failure when it comes to leadership, how to cultivate this idea of shifting what a failure is and not making mistakes mean failure, meaning disaster, meaning





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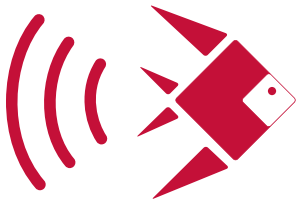
a lack of success.

WILL: Yeah and I think it starts, it's funny. You were just saying that ... it's interesting because I think the responsibility is shared with leadership and with employees, and I think it starts at the hiring process. When you think about it, I think I got the chance to share this story with you, Beth. I was talking to, after I got hired, I was sharing the news of being hired with a young Jesuit who is a dear friend of mine, and he stopped and he said, "Wow, Will, how great to know that you were hired for who you are as a human being," and I went and that is so unique and I think the opposite happens a little too often where we put such pressure on ourselves to try to be what we think that person wants and it's a natural pressure and it comes from, as you were talking before, this idea that a master's degree and a piece of paper will fit your job description exactly. That doesn't happen. So I think from day one on a job we set ourselves up to fail because we are constantly trying to be the person who we think the person who hired us wants us to be, though we've never had a conversation with that person saying like, "What do you expect?" do you know what I mean? We just freed ourselves up to embrace the possibility that we were hired for who we are and the gifts that we bring and then on the other side, we reward that and we bring people in for who they are as human beings. Then all the structure starts crumbling down in the best of ways and we're all free to create beyond what we would even expect of ourselves.

BETH: Right. So how are you managing to create this culture within St. Joe's that brings in this openness, this idea where risk is supported and encouraged?

WILL: Yeah, well I'm incredibly lucky. So if anyone has any familiarity with the Jesuits, they're sort of the gold standard for risk taking, which is really, really helpful to be at this place and remember, I'm an alumnus of this school, so for me, this is sort of where I started learning all of this. I am fortunate that I'm in a place where it's sort of encouraged, and it's not across the board or anything. There are people from all different walks of life, but it's not extreme here to entertain the idea of risk or entertain the idea of redefining failure and what that might mean





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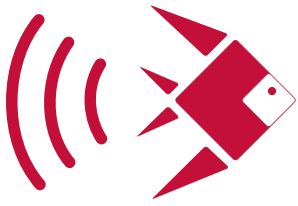
because most of us are educating these young men to think the same way, to be bold and when you're faced with something, you walk right into it and you figure out how to solve it instead of sort of running the other way. So it is. It's part of who the Jesuits are, but I think, I don't know for somebody who is outside of an environment like this or someone who is in a position of leadership somewhere else. As far as cultivating that, I think you need to experience it and you need to see that it can breed success and you need to be willing to take a risk, but I mean, there are examples absolutely everywhere. It's trending now. I can't believe I just said that. I just said I don't believe in the trends because they change, but you'll see a number of organizations and corporations across the globe that are now turning to improv for training because it's teaching you the 21st century skills, you know, the c's: communication, collaboration, creativity. Well, that's it. That's all improv is, those three c's and we're starting to see that they're more beneficial to the work force, especially as this younger generation comes up and learning from the "millennials" because they're going to ultimately direct what way we go and I think we're gonna start seeing an increased value put on ideas again and the effect that ideas can have on an organization's success.

BETH: I sure hope so. What would you say is the hardest part, like you're in an organization that's pretty progressive and forwardly thinking and open, but lots of people aren't. We've talked to people and worked with people that are really struggling with trying to be the change and bring shifts and creativity to organizations that are very fixed in their ways. How do you balance the desire for creative progression, to like move things forward and try things with that sort of way things are attitude? How would somebody begin to integrate that or crack the door open a little bit in an organization where this is maybe hard?

WILL: Yeah and I think it's like, this is so much easier said than done.

BETH: Right, we can talk about it, which is why I ask things like that. I want to come in and talk about the big, strategic pictures, but I know that people that are listening, they want to know like how do I start, where do I go?



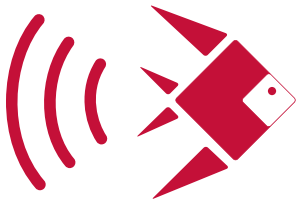


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WILL: Yeah, and I think with anything, it's like one is we need to embrace the reality that the wheels of progress usually move pretty slowly, especially the bigger the organization you're in, the slower those wheels would be able to move, but I don't think we're in a position where we have to wait for leadership. I think you can start effecting small changes along the way and then leadership will notice. If you are in a place where it's just about the bottom line, well you can start changing the culture and the culture will help shift the bottom line, too. It's as simple as, again easier said than done, but like if you're positive that has such a far-reaching effect. Now the hardest part is like if you're in a work environment that is negative, then you are the salmon swimming up stream at that point, but it doesn't mean that you don't do it and it can start with something as simple as saying to yourself like, "Great, today everything is going to be "yes and." I'm gonna start with me and I'm gonna accept other people's ideas and see if I can help build on that." You may only get to 10:30, but that's fine because it's an hour and a half past wherever you were yesterday. So and then it spreads from there, but it's also something as simple as start a new tradition and it's a tradition that you might have control over. So you can't control you know training sessions or professional development sessions or things like that, but what you can control is lunch. So if you're in an office where everyone sits in their cubicle and eats lunch by themselves and surfs the web or goes on Facebook for an hour, like try doing something different at lunch. Try organizing a lunch group and then after you organize that lunch group, like go one step further. It's like, I don't know. What if we all start reading the same article from the same publication about positivity and then our lunch is our chance to talk about that? Even more basic from that. If you just find something that's interesting that you share. It's really about reconnecting as human beings. I think that's where all of it starts. I mean, you said in the beginning Beth, everything is about relationships and sadly we've moved, everything about the work force is like moving in the opposite direction. It's all isolated in this world and part of it is technology. That would be a whole different soap box, but the more we get lost in our phones, the less we're talking to each other.





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BETH: Exactly. It's funny. I was even, I have young 20-somethings that work with me, and I have them as children as well, and we always joke. Now one of the stories they're gonna be telling to their kids 20 years from now, but even little things like in my first job, they're always asking me about technology and, oh well, we didn't have computers, and how did you do this job differently, and I said it's that, but it's also we have to print something out and walk it over to somebody's cubicle and hand it to them. You'll see little points of contact with people throughout the day, and now it's just emails back and forth or people with chats and it is amazing how different that disconnected thing is. It's becoming such a big issue that every branding proposal that I have done for anybody lately, the word "culture" comes up. It's fascinating ...

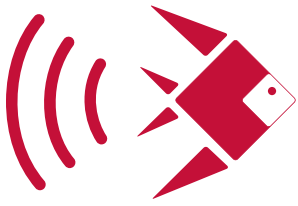
WILL: I laugh because of recognition. Absolutely.

BETH: Years ago when people when they would talk about branding, and it still happens, they think, "I'm gonna change my logo," and I'm really fascinated, pleased and impressed that people are starting to get that who you are as an organization is a combination of your visual image, what you say after the experience that people have with you and that the experience can only be created successfully if you have a good culture. So more and more people are talking about the internal culture of an organization and what does that look like and how do you cultivate it? It's been absolutely fascinating to me that people are bringing this up to me on their own.

WILL: Yeah because people recognize it. Even if it's subconscious or actively conscious people are already recognizing it, this just made me think too Beth of here's a challenge for anyone who is listening who wants to start making a difference. Do two things: one, call everyone by their name and two, pay attention to how you say people's names.

BETH: OK, what do you mean by that?





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WILL: Well, I think, because I was thinking about the fact that it's email and we're not walking down to people's desks and even the phone. You know, so many times I'll get an email and I'll go, "Why didn't that person just pick up the phone?" and they're like, they're on the same floor as me. Just call me and the idea of when we answer a phone, do we answer the phone ... we all know who is calling now because we don't answer the phone. So how are you answering the phone? Are you answering it and saying, "Hey, Beth," or is it just "hi" or "what." Like we've become so short with one another that we're not even using people's names and then you know, how do we say the name? Like this is sort of, I'm non-tangential. I'm going off a little bit, but ...

BETH: That's how these things roll, don't they.

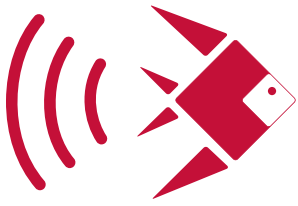
WILL: Yeah, and I shared this, and I just got married this spring.

BETH: Congratulations!

WILL: Thank you very much! The same young Jesuit who said to me how great you got hired for who you are as a human being gave the homily at our Mass and this matters not whether you're a person of faith, what denomination. That's not the point at all, but the message of his homily, which sticks with me is how we show love in how we say somebody's name and that can be romantic love between a husband and his wife or a husband and a husband or a wife and a wife or it could be familial love between a parent and a child or it can be friendship. It can be, ironically, philanthropy. Philanthropy in Greek is love for human kind, but we can show that in how we say someone's name. So if you want to take a small first step sort of being positive? Pay attention to that. Just pay attention to how you say people's names, and if you use their name when you talk to them.

BETH: That's so interesting, especially as somebody who, I have an almost two-year-old granddaughter who has been taking her own pace to learn to speak, and I happened to be at my son and daughter-in-law's house when my granddaughter first said "mama." Very much, much, much later than other people, and to look at





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my daughter-in-law's face and how it just crumbled. You really see that the little things like that really matter.

WILL: Look, there's so few things in this world that offer us a glimpse of what love looks like. You can't see love, you can't see it. So we can only see manifestations of it. So like, gosh let's be more responsible with how we use those things.

BETH: Exactly and it's fascinating to be in this world as an observer and one of the things I've been noticing lately is eye contact actually and I think, you never know where these conversations are gonna go, but I actually started to notice it. I have a little thing that hangs my phone off of my car...

WILL: Mirror or vents?

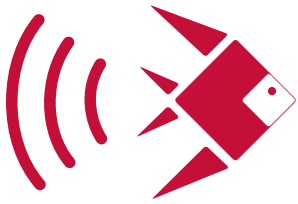
BETH: It actually hangs from the mirror and I actually caught myself recognizing that I was driving, I think following the GPS that was on my phone and actually not looking at the road at all. Like not really looking at the road with my eyes and my brain, that much more of my driving attention is put on, is my arrow on the blue line. It's so bizarre, but that made me start to think when I was at the grocery store and I'm checking out, did I actually even make eye contact with the person that's checking me out? Just little tiny things. It's funny. When I started practicing eye contact, it actually felt really risky to me. I got uncomfortable and I thought, "Whoa, this is really interesting."

WILL: I'm so glad you used the word "uncomfortable," too. I think we all need to spend more time in the uncomfortable.

BETH: Talk about why.

WILL: Right, well if something makes you uncomfortable, then there's a reason why it does. So spend time with that. This is a very, very, very Jesuit thing, but it's like, it's find that thing that is making you uncomfortable and then go live in it





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because one, you'll figure out why, and then two, you'll take ownership of it.

BETH: Right.

WILL: Yeah! Then you won't be uncomfortable anymore. It's the same thing with risk. It's the same exact thing. Well, how do you take that first risk? Go spend time in whatever is scaring you.

BETH: It's like my dad said, you know how you get better at making sales calls? Make sales calls. Basically the only way to really delete or get over that discomfort is familiarity.

WILL: Yeah, yeah and going walking right into it. Recognize that it's making you uncomfortable and then go ahead anyway.

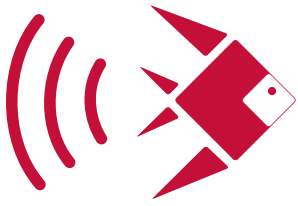
BETH: It's great that you say that because people tell me all the time because I've owned a business for 20 years, "Oh my gosh, you're so brave. I could never do what you do," and I have to tell people all the time that no, that's not what it is. It's that for some reason I have decided, I guess I want to not have a boss that badly, but it's like I'm terrified all the time, but I do it anyway and it's a conscious effort of choosing to say, I'm not comfortable, but the outcome of it, the life that this gives me, is better than if I didn't. The fear doesn't go away in life. I just don't think it does.

WILL: No, I don't think it ever does either. You know this reminds me. When we got to chat last time, this idea that fear and comfortability are close cousins.

BETH: It's so true.

WILL: Right, uncomfortability is merely the fear of the unknown really. I don't want to diminish the value of comfort. There's credible value in comfort, but when we choose something merely because it's comfortable, a lot of times we're doing that because it's not the other and the other involves a sense of fear or risk





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taking.

BETH: Right. In my world, they say if you're not a little bit afraid you're not trying hard enough. I found in my life and in my business that when I get really, really comfortable all of a sudden I look around and things have, like everything sort of slows down and spirals downward. It's a delicate balance of challenging yourself to feel engaged and focused and kind of that buzz of wanting to do something different without keeping yourself so on high alert you feel like you're gonna throw up all the time. In your work, since you teach improv and then you go out and you're trying to embed this idea into the work that you do, into the culture that you work in, how do you find the right edge?

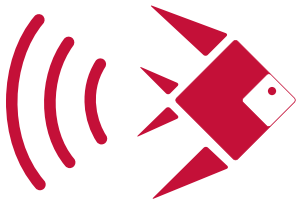
WILL: Yeah, that's a great question. I think at the end of the day I'm lucky in that, again my formative years were very helpful in shaping who I am. I so believe in the value of knowing what you want to do and then doing it, that at the end of the day, finding a balance or the edge or whatever it is, if I believe this stuff enough to go out and to teach it and to teach it as a life skill, not merely as a performance skill, then that means I have to live that. If I don't live that, that's not a part of my everyday life, then I'm a terrible teacher.

BETH: It's about authenticity.

WILL: Yeah, and teaching has nothing to do with, at least at a high school level or even in the context of improv or something like that, it has nothing to do with a mastery. Nobody knows everything about anything. What's a good teacher? Somebody who is so overwhelmingly passionate and believes so completely in whatever they're talking about that even if you don't believe it yourself, you're inspired to figure out what makes you feel that way.

BETH: I love that you said that because one of the big fears that I had to get over is I started public speaking many years ago, maybe seven years ago and I was the one ... my mother would always ask me to do the reading in church and





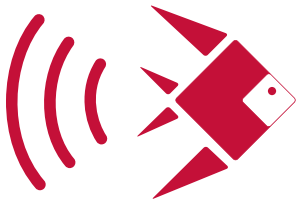
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I'm "No, no, no, no." I always joke that the way I got to be a good public speaker was having to read out loud to my children because they were the biggest critics of everything. It's goofy, but that's kind of where I started, and eventually I got up and got brave enough to go out and do public speaking, and now I teach classes. When I first started teaching, that's exactly what I thought. Like, I am not an expert. I started in 2009 when social media was just jumping the fence into business, and I realized that there's lots of leaders in nonprofits that are having people come to them saying we should be doing X, and they don't know whether they should say yes or not. So I thought, let me teach classes to leaders at nonprofits to get them comfortable enough to be able to make a good decision for their organization. So it wasn't pro or con. It was competency, awareness and calm the heck down. My biggest fear when I first started was "Oh my gosh, I'm only a few months ahead of these people in the room. What if somebody asks me something that I don't know the answer to?" and it was terrifying. Over the years, that's exactly what I've learned is that my goal is to curate a conversation, to convene people together to talk about something that's interesting and to be really OK asking the room what they think and not only being the one with the answers and it's been really interesting to see how for me that's now been able to be pulled forward into my business. I can now ask my team and not feel like I have to be the most knowledgeable about everything in my business. I think this idea of taking risks and cultivating this culture of, I don't know, discomfort is great for everyone from a leader all the way down to the newest person in your organization and to feel comfortable at sharing their ideas.

WILL: Absolutely, I mean, a thousand times yes. Nothing great was ever achieved when someone was comfortable. I think that's important to remember too and it's funny. Not to bring this completely full circle back to improv, but that idea that you're talking about, like sort of facilitating ideas or facilitating conversation that ultimately leads to the best idea or the best answer in the room and that you don't have to have those answers, there's is one more tenant in improv that's called follow the follower and what it means is there is no, there's ultimately no leader. There's a room full of leaders. So when it's your turn to be the leader





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because you might be the most knowledgeable, then it's your turn and then right after that, somebody else's turn to be the leader. The idea itself where the "right answer" itself is what we're all striving for. How we get there and who is in the leader's position or in the driver's seat at any given moment, that varies and that changes based on the needs of the particular moment. It's very freeing and I think it coincides with exactly what you're talking about, this idea of like just facilitate others to help find the best answer.

BETH: I love that and it's funny because one of the things I say a lot is that like the role of a fundraiser, the role of an organization isn't, like nobody gives money to you to make your organization great, but your job is to facilitate other people's dreams. If we can cultivate this idea of being the facilitator inside of our organizations, it's just naturally going to spread out from there and I think that will be really a great skill, a great opportunity and a great growth for anybody that has the role of guiding an organization forward.

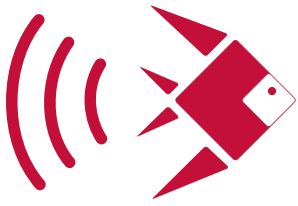
WILL: Absolutely. Let's hope so, let's hope so.

BETH: Will, thank you so much. This has been really interesting and fascinating. I learned a bunch of new things and I just always enjoy having these conversations, and I'm so thrilled that we've gotten the chance to know each other and that you've shared all of your knowledge and insight with both me and our whole nonprofit community.

WILL: Yeah, hey thank you so much for having me on. This was absolutely delightful. Again, I'm no expert either. I share what I might know and then you know, turn it over to everyone else who might be an expert to do with it what they want.

BETH: And if people did want to ask you more questions and learn a little bit more from what you do know, what's a good way for them to get in touch with you?





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WILL: Sure. Folks could email me at either WilliamJDennis@gmail.com or at WDennis@SJPrep.org, and for those who are a little more tweet friendly, you can feel free to follow me at @WilliamJDennis or @Speakmagis. Those are the two best ways to get in touch with me.

BETH: Thank you so much. This was fabulous and I so appreciate having you on.

WILL: Absolutely. Thank you so much.

