



Leading through uncertainty: A conversation with Dr. Georges Sabongui PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

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Guest: Dr. Georges Sabongui

Jill Morgan: Hi everyone and welcome. My name is Jill Morgan. I'm so pleased today to be joined by Dr. Georges Sabongui, who is a stress expert and a psychologist. He's going to help us dig a little bit deeper into how we can stay afloat when sometimes it feels like everything's a bit uncertain.

Dr. Georges, the COVID-19 pandemic has really changed how businesses have had to operate right across Canada. And the situation is always evolving and that's forcing leaders and business owners to really be nimble and agile. There's no playbook on how to work your business through a pandemic. So a lot of this is new. What is some advice you can offer leaders who are trying to stay connected with their staff? As they're maybe coming back to work but then you still have other staff members who are working remotely. How do you maintain that connection piece?

Dr. Georges Sabongui: Well I think the key word that is used there is leadership. You know, as an ex-military commander I can tell you leadership is lonely. And one of the reasons it's lonely is that sometimes when you're in a leadership position – whether it's because you're an entrepreneur running your business or you're the head of the family – and you're trying to make sure that your decisions are in, you know, taking everybody and everybody's wellness into consideration. You know in the older tribal civilizations, a leader could only be as happy as the most unhappy member of the tribe. And that's sort of how as leaders, our range of caring is always a lot more than our range of influence. And so it's tough to fight those feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. OK, so here we are faced with a situation that we've never faced before. They don't teach us this in business school, although maybe crisis intervention should be part of the curriculum. I'm dealing with this as a human being but I'm also dealing with this in a role as a leader. And sometimes those two roles are really challenging. You know as human being, I just want to crawl under my bed and hide. But as a leader one of the most important things you need to do is be up front, visible, accessible. If you still have employees that are coming to work: actually walking around and having some one-on-one time with each employee just to make sure how are they doing on a human level. If you're meeting virtually: also check in with people one-on-one, have a little virtual meeting.

So one of the toughest things about being a leader is we often feel that we have to be the smartest kid in the room and come up with all the solutions. And I don't care how smart you are, at some point it's just too heavy a burden to carry, always being the smartest person in the room. It's just too much. So sometimes being able to be authentic and vulnerable and saying to your team, Hey listen, we've got this challenge that's actually way too big for me to handle on

my own and I'm going to need everybody's input. So a quick anecdote. I have a friend who works at Google. And at Google for every position that they have opened they get 30,000 applications. And so Google used to hire the best of the best and the brightest of the brightest. And they realized that the best and the brightest aren't always so effective, especially in leadership roles. Because when you've been the smartest kid in the room your entire life, you have this problem: you come up and you say OK team, listen up. I'm the smart kid in the room. Here's the problem, here's my analysis, here's the solution. Go ahead and execute. Then you have all these brilliant people sitting around the table that you just sort of cut off at the knees and the B students would come in and say: OK team, listen up. Here's this problem and listen, I ain't that smart so I know that I've got some blind spots and some things that are missing in my analysis. So I really need everybody's input from around the table to help us figure out. You know, get a bird's eye view and have different perspectives on this problem so we can really come up with a cohesive solution. So sometimes – and this was in the Google memo that my friend sent me, it said you know why Google no longer hires top students? And the idea was that sometimes being the smartest kid in the room leaves you without the mental flexibility and the intellectual humility that you need to be really effective as a leader. That sometimes having the intellectual humility to say, you know what? This one's way above my head and I need everybody's intelligence and genius, because alone I've only got one life experience, you know? But around the table, maybe we have hundreds or thousands of years of experience and wisdom and knowledge and creativity. Collective intelligence is way better than having to count on one kid to figure this all out for us.

So really, and this isn't just good for a leader to take a lot of pressure off the leader's shoulders, it's great for the team to get them engaged and get them motivated. You know if you're always doing top-down decision making, then all your team can do is resist. They know that's not going to work, that's stupid. OK good. I know I have lots of stupid ideas, you know why don't you guys jump in and come up with some brilliant solutions to this? And when you get them engaged, they're empowered, you give them as much decision making authority as they need. You can't just delegate a task. Delegate an area of responsibility and give them as much latitude and decision making authority and they'll amaze you. But if we're always force-feeding people with our top-down decisions, we don't give them any room to amaze us. And we're always going to be very limited in what we can do.

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Jill: Does the teamwork aspect help people better navigate the fear of the unknown? Because that's something that's coming up quite frequently as we work our way through this pandemic. And getting the economy back online and businesses back to business as usual, there's still unknowns and it doesn't feel usual. How do you navigate the unknown and the fear of the unknown?

Dr. Georges: Well there has to be something immutable. In the chaos... so the chaos and the unknown are constantly changing. We're constantly having to re-adapt and reinvent ourselves. And through all this constant change and turmoil we have to find something that's immutable. And some things that are immutable and deeper than the events are: who we are as people and realigning and refocusing on our values. So here we are as, you know, maybe

entrepreneurs and business people and leaders. And so we have to ask ourselves OK, I don't know what the right thing to do is all the time but I know what my values are.

And if I had the luxury of really aligning my behaviour with my values, forget about the short-term economic thing, we're all going through a cataclysm and that's OK. What do my values say is the right thing to do?

So one of the little things that I could share for the leaders out there who were having to make really, really tough decisions: I was talking to one of my clients who happens to be a manager in a company, and she had to cut 30 percent of her budget. And so she lost a couple of nights of sleep. She didn't know what to do and so she just got her whole team together. She said, listen I have to make the toughest decision of my professional life and I don't know what to do. We can lay off 30 percent of the workers or we can all take a 30 percent pay cut. It's just too big a decision for me to make on my own so I'm really going to need your help on this one. And the entire company decided; they voted to take a 30 percent pay cut in order to be able to keep everybody on the payroll. And we're all going to sort of tighten our belts a little bit. But nobody is going to be left out in the cold. The owner of the company said listen you know we're going to do our best. And even though we don't have a lot of work, you all voted to stay on and take a pay cut. So even if we have to pay you guys to just sit at your desk or sit at home and do nothing for a couple of months, we're going to do that and try to keep everybody on the payroll as long as possible. So it's these kind of brilliant creative solutions to problems that actually help us get closer together. This is the chance for us to shine and be leaders. And so the left brain, the rational part, can't come up with these kind of solutions. Left brain just wants to sustain our comfort zone and wants us to contract and hide in fear. But the right brain loves these opportunities. So we're sort of stuck. Part of us wants to just go back to our old life as quickly as possible and find a comfort zone. And this other part of us is like, well now that things are falling apart, I wonder if this breakdown can actually lead to some kind of breakthrough and help me reinvent myself in my life in a way that's more meaningful in some ways?

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Jill: I read somewhere that someone had said we're all in the same storm but we're in different boats. The experience in a storm can be so different and so for those people that maybe don't thrive as much in chaos. How do they tap into some of that strength that they might see, other people doing better? It almost makes you feel worse if you're not rising to the occasion the way someone else is.

Dr. Georges: We think that the history of the world is a history of oppression and war and all this, but it's actually not. It's a history of collaboration and co-operation. In helping each other out, this is the way we've gotten so far. We're one of the most collaborative species on the planet. And so not having to be the smartest kid in the room, not having to come up with all the solutions is empowering people. This is what is going to make them feel useful and needed and give them some focus. And when we see that, our behaviour is actually resonant with our core values. Who are and what are we all about here? We're about people and we're about communities and we're about making a difference for Canadians. And so that's, you know, are we selling feed or are we selling farm equipment, are we growing carrots and wheat or whatever. Or are we about people, something deeper than the activity that we're

doing? It's about why we're doing this. So try to find what's your why. It's not selling products or growing crops. It's about having some contribution that is essential to the backbone of who we are as a people, as Canadians. And so one of the most beautiful things that I saw, for example, was on one of the FCC tours. One of the struggles for people in the agro sector in general is, you know, you're working so far behind the scenes that it's easy to think that nobody appreciates your sacrifice and nobody appreciates how hard you're working. Kids these days have a plate of food and they have no idea where this

food came from. From the people who sold you the seeds, to the people who sell the fertilizer, to the people who had the equipment, to the farmer who planted it, to the people who transformed it, so that we can eat it. I mean there's hundreds if not thousands of people that were involved in just making this simple meal for us. Right? And so if every person feels invisible and every person along that chain feels That, you know what, whether I show up for work, whether I don't, whether I do a good job or bad job my work is so invisible. Nobody really cares. Well that is a very dark place to go. So it's really important to show people how their daily sacrifice is like a cornerstone, that they're contributing to building something that is much, much bigger. So we don't work, we don't sell hours of our life for some money. What we do is we contribute. What we're contributing is some essential piece of the puzzle to make this whole thing, so that we can take care of the people that we care about.

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Jill: How do business leaders stay relatable to their staff, especially in a time of crisis when stress is higher?

Dr. Georges: I think it's OK to not be OK. I think it's really important for business leaders to also know that the old-school business leader was always a couple of tiers above everybody and wouldn't communicate with the employees, and had sort of these Like, you know, little hermetically sealed cubicles, where different layers of the corporate hierarchy weren't allowed to interact. And that's just not working anymore. People want real human beings to lead them, because trust is a delicate thing. And for example, as an ex-military officer I need to know that if I'm going to go into battle with somebody, I need to know that I can trust this person with my life in their hands. And it's a huge amount of trust. And so when you come to work every day and you work for a boss, you are trusting that person with your livelihood: "You know, if you make bad business decisions and you're a bad leader, well then I can't feed my family and so I need you to be a good leader."

So it's okay for leaders to ask their employees to say, Listen how can I be a better leader for you today? By the way, I think it would be a great question for every married couple or relationship, right? Ask your spouse every day, how can I love you better today? It's basically the same question. Maybe the way the person needs you to be a leader is by being more directive and authoritative and just, you know, make the call, Boss. We're going to follow you and maybe sometimes your team is going to need you to be more flexible and listen to bad ideas so that we can come up with good ones. But the only way to know is ask them, How can I be a better leader for you today? And remember intellectual humility and mental flexibility. Those are the keys of good leadership

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Jill: Great question to pose to leaders and get them thinking about how to better connect with their staff. What advice would you give business leaders who need to deliver a comforting message in a time of discomfort? It can be a bit contradictory at times.

Dr. Georges: Well nobody is going to believe you if you just sort of have this rah rah speech where everything's going to be OK. Everything is not going to be okay, but we're going to be okay. And I think that's the truth and the reality of it. We don't know what the post-COVID world is going to look like. We've seen the health impact, but now we're just starting to become aware of the economic impact. So it's like we're in this like slow-moving tsunami, you know, wave after wave just keeps crushing us. So first our social lives fall apart, then our professional lives are upended, now our family lives. And we have to become teachers overnight. Now the economic reality of, you know, not working for a couple of months is starting to hit a lot of families. So you can't tell people that everything's going to be okay, because the next wave they're going to say, See, you liar? You said everything was going to be okay. No. No, everything sucks. Everything's terrible, but we're going to be okay. We're going to be okay because we have values. We put people first and we're going to stick together and try to take care of everybody. And we're going to do our best to make sure that nobody gets left behind, and we're going to figure out the best way.

And you know, I want employees to know that especially if you work for a smaller family-owned business, your bosses are working so hard for you to keep your job. You know, whether it's a little restaurant down the street or it's the family farm or it's the little agro business that, you know, started off in somebody's kitchen with a great idea to sell something on Etsy or whatever. Whoever you are working for. You know, over 50 percent of Canadians are working for companies that have five or fewer employees. So it's not ... the corporate world is not the dominant paradigm. It is these tiny small Mom and Pop shops, family-owned businesses. That's ... Or even self-employed. That's more than half of Canadians. So yeah, we're going to be okay. We're going to be okay because even if you have to reinvent yourself, you know, you've reinvented yourself many times in the past. And every time you have to reinvent yourself it gets a little bit easier.

And for entrepreneurs, you know, you've built your business once – you might lose 30 40 percent of your business this year. But you know what? Next year you can come back stronger. Use this time to figure out creative ways to do things better. Make sure that you're not always the smartest person in the room, that you're really engaging everybody else to come up with some brilliant solutions. And people are going to amaze you and surprise you.

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Jill: Would you say there's a best way to communicate those messages? There's all kinds of communication channels nowadays and in this COVID space we've been forced into a lot of internet-based conversations. But would you say there's a best way for leaders to communicate with staff?

Dr. Georges: The more human the better. You know, I often think that language was the worst invention in human history because language only showed up in the evolutionary scale maybe 50 or 100 thousand years ago. But before that, for millions of years humans were communicating without having to talk to each other. So you know putting words on a piece of paper or putting it on the email and sending it is just so devoid of all the humanity that we need to really feel like, OK, this person is sharing our reality. So you send out a simple email. You're missing the most important part of the communications, that people need to see you, they need to know that you're real and that you're in the trenches with them. That you're not off vacationing in the Bahamas while we're in the trenches toughing this out. So be as visible as possible whether it's through some kind of virtual medium, if you still have employees coming in, whether it's, you know, some kind of factory or something. Actually take some time to speak to them in person. Written is probably the least good way. There's no great way but there's some less good and some "gooder" as my kids would say, some better ways to communicate. So the more human, the more visual interaction, the better it's going to be. And authenticity and humility definitely is the flavour of the modern leader. You know they're not going to believe you if you say that you're not affected, because we're all affected. But they care about you more than you know and you care about them more than they know. And that's where we have to have that faith in each other. You know what, my boss is working really hard to figure out ways to get us through this and we're going to also work really hard to make our boss into a yes man. We're going to come up with all these great ideas and say hey you know what, you don't have to come up with all the solutions. Here's a couple of crazy ideas we had. And your boss just sits there and says, Yep, that's a great idea. Do that, do that. So for the employees listening too, turn your boss into a yes man. Come up with all the solutions because it's tough to be the smartest kid in the room.

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Jill: I've heard you use the analogy from being on an airplane where you're told in an emergency situation to put your own oxygen mask on in case of an emergency before you help other people. Which is a great way of explaining how we have to look after ourselves before we can properly look after other people. What is your advice to leaders about getting to that place of self care and making sure that they are doing just that, putting their own oxygen mask on first?

Dr. Georges: You know, I'm human. I'm going through this and I'm experiencing the wave after wave of whatever, you know, professional upset and reinventing the family structure and work and all this. So on top of being Dr. Georges, I'm also just Georges the dad who forgot to take out the garbage last week. You know, in a crisis – of all the options available to us, freaking out is not one of them. That is the only option that's off the table. All the other options are possible but freaking out isn't one of them. So I need to stay resilient and strong and sort of contaminate people positively. What I've done is I started a little file on my computer that I, you know, jokingly called "COVID Positive," which is just positive videos or messages or memes that I read. So for example, one of the videos that I put there this week was this boy scout troop that decided to all get together and sew masks and bring like 2,000 masks that they'd sewn together to their local community hospital. So all these stories of bringing out the best in people. These are the kind of stories that you want leaders to share with their employees, you know, because God only knows where we're so bombarded with the media

and the negativity and the horror scenarios and you know trying to block out some of the media and controlling the influx of information. And I try to tune my brain to things that are really uplifting messages. Messages of hope, people really stepping up and doing amazing things for their communities or for their businesses. And I just throw it all in there and whenever I'm having a bad moment, then I just go OK, I need 15 minutes. I go crawl into my office and I'll just start pumping my brain full of these beautiful little, you know, inspiring videos. Sometimes comedians are great because comedians have this brilliant, genius way of transforming trauma into laughter. And so I'll sometimes just feed my brain some positivity by listening to whoever Sugar Sammy or Russell Peters or whoever makes me laugh these days. And that way I can also be positive for the people who need me too.

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Jill: To conclude, what are a couple of key takeaways for business leaders as they navigate these uncharted waters of a pandemic?

Dr. Georges: I think we should stay away from the impulse to go back to business as usual as quickly as possible. It sounds flippant and cruel to say, but I think it's a great opportunity for businesses to reinvent themselves. If you listen to the people that are working with you and for you, they will give you some brilliant ideas and opportunities that come out of this. One of the people that did the FCC Forums a couple of years ago was Manjit Minhas who owns the Minhas breweries. And so I know that they've dedicated all of their alcohol producing equipment and repurposed it to make hand sanitizer right now. So I mean, I think this is an example of doing something that's really aligned with your core values. Yes maybe it's not as lucrative and profitable to make hand sanitizers, but I think doing these things shows who you are, what your values are. It really inspires the employees to believe in you, like wow, hey these people aren't just out to make money. We're not going to make money making hand sanitizer with our alcohol producing equipment, but it means that the people I work for actually are real human beings and they really care.

So aligning your decisions with your core values that are somehow contributing make a difference in the community or in the country. And that's how you're going to really get your employees to buy in and stick it through with you.

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Jill: Great advice. Wise words, as always. Thank you so much for your time, Dr. Georges.

Dr. Georges: Thank you, Jill.

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