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Changing the future of your organization starts with you: One CEO's journey of self-understanding

Shane Murphy Goldsmith, CEO of social justice organization Liberty Hill, tells us her story...

The purpose of Liberty Hill

An introduction to Shane and the mission-driven organization she leads

Liberty Hill has a powerful mission. Based in LA, a county with a thriving and diverse population of about 10 million, they champion social justice and equity for all through a combination of community empowerment, innovative activism, and progressive partnerships. They're driven by the vision of a society where all people have a voice and absolutely no one is excluded from either opportunities or democracy because they are poor, because of their skin color, because of their gender or sexual orientation, because of where they live, or where they were born.

Shane Murphy Goldsmith is the President and CEO of Liberty Hill and has led the organization through an era of incredible success and growth. In the last six years they've nearly doubled their

staff and more than tripled their budget, helping them make even more of a positive impact. In 2021 Liberty Hill has awarded over $19 million in grants to programs, community initiatives, and activist causes, all working towards social change. The performance of Liberty Hill as a business has a direct impact on the people and communities it supports, which is why Shane set out to build the best possible team, starting with herself.

My challenge

In 2016 the team at Liberty Hill was in a very different place. There was a high turnover, and morale was not great. Silos kept people from collaborating and there wasn't enough trust to help people overcome some of the communication challenges they faced. With all of these challenges in the teams, Shane reached out to Insights Partner Lorenza Pakula, the President of Delta Prime Consulting, to find a solution.

Lorenza recognized many of the signs of a team that needed to work on trust, and trust starts at the very top. She recommended a new experience for Shane and the executive team, one that encouraged them to spend time on themselves, their own behaviors, and their relationships with each other. It was an unusual step for the team – and especially for Shane – as we learned when we talked to her about this very first encounter with Insights Discovery.

"I was nervous about revealing a lot about myself in front of others and afraid of going down this path of trust and feelings. I thought at the time that it was going to be a massive distraction from the work."

As a CEO, Shane was highly focused on plans, actions and results. She was soon to learn that it wasn't actually her job role that determined this – it was her own personal preferences. But the thought of taking time to actively be vulnerable, to not be in control, and to acknowledge weakness, was understandably uncomfortable for her. This first act of trust – of committing to challenging herself and exposing her vulnerabilities to her team – was going to be revolutionary for both Shane and Liberty Hill.

My profile

"I was going into territory that wasn't my strong suit and I couldn't control if it was productive or beneficial. But the conflicts in my team weren't getting any better and I had to humbly acknowledge that I didn't know what to do or how to do it."

Insights Discovery works by helping people understand themselves on a deeper level and then extending to what this means for how they work with others. When Shane first opened her Insights Discovery Personal Profile, she was faced with a description of a person she didn't recognize.

"My reading of the profile gave me the impression of someone cold and insensitive, lacking emotional intelligence and possessing intense expectations of people that they couldn't meet."

Shane's initial reaction to her profile was somewhat defensive. She focused on the parts of the profile that described how she sometimes came across to others as harsh, overbearing and cold, with very high expectations – she didn't want to believe it. However, as part of the Insights Discovery session the team had the valuable opportunity to share their perceptions of each other in a safe, friendly and non-judgmental way.

"The most revelatory moment was when I did an exercise with my team and we all put a post-it on each other's back and indicated what color we thought people led with. Most people gave me Fiery Red and I couldn't believe they knew this about me and I didn't. These people work with me every day and they know me. Having this perspective I took it more seriously and, once I looked at it with more open mindedness, I could see the whole picture about how I was showing up."

Acknowledging that she wasn't always showing up the way she intended was just the beginning for Shane. The next step was to apply this knowledge for real benefit to herself, her team and the whole organization, and Shane was ready and eager to explore the possibilities.
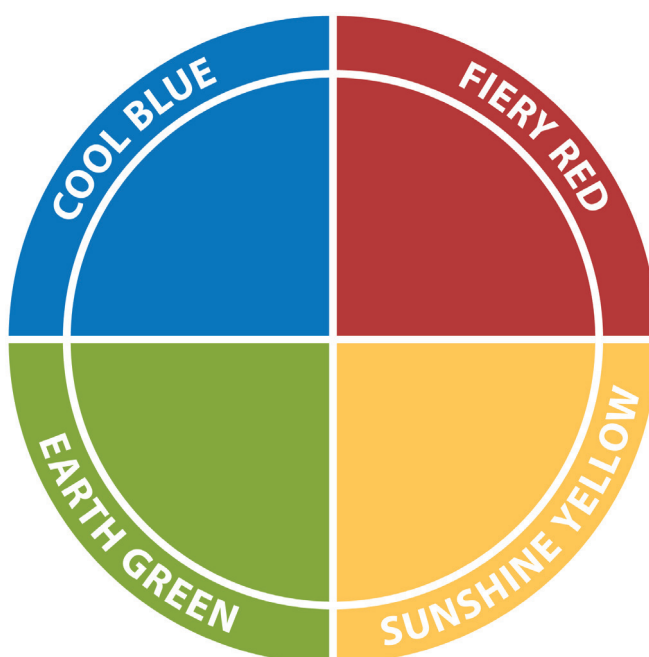
"When I took the energy I expended keeping my vulnerabilities and weaknesses hidden and started putting it into the opposite, we flourished."

Starting with me

First, Shane needed to get comfortable with herself. It had been startling seeing a stark reflection in the profile, but it helped her realize that some of her behaviors were having unintended effects. As she started to work more with other people with different preferences, and share profiles with others in her team, she learned that perception plays a much bigger part than she'd previously assumed. Her perception of how she was showing up was often different from how others perceived her, especially those who had opposing personality types. A particularly valuable thing for Shane to learn for herself – especially after reading what she viewed as negative traits in her profile – was that she came across in certain ways at certain times but that's not who she is.

"When I looked at the profile again I could see there were strengths and assets I'd previously missed. Though I come across in certain ways at certain times that's not how I am all the time or with every person."

Six years later, Shane has spent a lot of time working on herself and she's reached a level of security and comfort in herself – flaws included – that has made her an even better leader.

"I am now able to be my authentic self as a leader. In the past I thought I had to be unflappable but the reality is being my full, authentic, flawed self makes me a much better leader. When I took the energy I expended keeping my vulnerabilities and weaknesses hidden and started putting it into the opposite, we flourished."

Helping my teams

Secondly, Shane needed to start applying this new approach with the staff at Liberty Hill to start addressing some of the cohesion challenges. She started with her newly hired executive team.

"My team was hesitant at first for different reasons. We're professionals and executive leaders – and for some of us – this was our first experience with this type of training. This was going to require us to embrace vulnerability to build trust among the team, and to learn to lean into discomfort as we worked to understand our challenges as well as our strengths—which can be difficult for executives used to hierarchical leadership. There's also this expectation in gen x that you suck it up and get the job done and you don't show feelings. The greatest source of resistance for us at first was that's not what you're meant to do at work. The power dynamics in an executive team can add a level of fear regarding vulnerability but, because the tension and communication barriers were real, they were willing to try it; they could see that it was identifying issues they really were experiencing. We had to believe our problems were serious before we could look at the solution."

The team learned that they were diverse from an Insights Discovery perspective and that they all had very different ways of working. They were able to start using the color energy language and profile to work on their relationships and team dynamics – starting with how they were showing up to each other. Feedback was the key to this:

"Once I realized my profile was true I accepted that when someone gave me feedback - even if I didn't like it - I wouldn't try to contradict it. This helped me learn how to receive feedback with less defensiveness and see the truth in it when seen from their perspective. It allowed me to be a role model for this. If I can change my own behavior, it's disarming and reassuring for people to see how they can do their part too."

Feedback became a vehicle to address many of the challenges the teams were facing around trust and collaboration. Using the language of color energies helped to depersonalize feedback so that it could be given more positively and constructively. People could give feedback about behaviors in their profiles, and they could also encourage each other to dial up certain behaviors, e.g. "We need to map out multiple scenarios if the pandemic causes a financial crisis for us, so let's dial up our Cool Blue".

All of this behavior change stems from a foundation of self-understanding. Like Shane, when everyone in the team knows and understands what their strengths and areas for growth are, they know what they need to dial up or down in a given situation, enabling them to adapt.

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Changing the future

Shane has become a huge advocate for self-awareness after her own rich and transformational experience. The growth she's achieved as a leader has helped her build a stronger, more connected team, and has led to increased collaboration and conflict resolution—accelerating the success of the whole organization. Since her first expedition into self-understanding, her role has also changed. As Liberty Hill has grown in complexity and size, she's shifted from personally directing every project to really supporting the team and leading with vision, which has meant moving beyond a sole focus on strategy and results to relying on her team members to lead with their strengths and color energies, which complement hers. She would not have been able to accomplish what she has without the work she's put into being her absolute best self.

"Being able to lean into supporting the team, through Insights primarily as the framework and tool, has allowed us all to flourish and become more than a sum of our parts. I am able to lead in a way that leans into emotional intelligence, team building, communication and feedback."

When Shane set out to help her teams she was initially skeptical about how focusing on 'feelings' could make a real difference, but she's witnessed the impact it's had – on her and the entire organization.

"The counter-intuitive result is that I thought it would be a distraction but it has been the exact opposite. What we've achieved is so much more than I ever imagined we could do on every conceivable metric. I see it as one of my absolute best contributions."

What's next?

What Shane is doing now is leading a new internal program built around Liberty Hill's core values – Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. It's a mission-aligned program and a great passion for every single employee. Working with their Insights Partner, Lorenza, they're integrating the JEDI and Insights Discovery frameworks so that they can explore the very emotive and personal issues around diversity in the best possible way. Shane wanted to bring the Insights Discovery framework into this program because, at their core, both frameworks are about learning to be and celebrate your whole self. What Shane learned herself about becoming comfortable and proud of who you are, valuing that others are different, being vulnerable, and giving and receiving direct feedback is exactly what she wanted to convey within this program.

"As a white leader who works for a multi-racial organization that focuses on social justice, I need to be vulnerable and humble and receptive to feedback. Having the foundation of Insights Discovery and that personal journey got me to the place where I could acknowledge my imperfections and understand people's behavior in the context of color energies. That lets me know what they need so I can approach them in the best way possible for me – and them."

Shane wanted to tell the story of her journey to show other leaders how being self-aware and authentic has helped her change the future of her organization. Read more about Liberty Hill's journey and the incredible work they do to support justice in their community here.

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FOUNDATION