

Commanding the Conversation is a Full-Body Experience with Lena Sisco

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Announcer: Why do some companies stand out, while others seem to merely show up? That's what we'll explore with leaders across multiple industries to hear how they're creating better experiences by design. And now your host, Susan Quinn.

Susan Quinn: Being a good communicator may seem like a straightforward skill. But according to research, 93% of leaders think they're great at it, but only 11% of their employees agree. That's because effective communication is a set of learned skills that requires incredible self-awareness and continuous development and improvement. My guest today, Lena Sisco is a former Navy Intelligence Officer who is a body language and communications expert. This episode is full of powerful tips on how to communicate with confidence and clarity and it will provide growth for your team and company. Lena, welcome to the podcast. I am excited to have you with us today.

Lena Sisco: Thank you. I'm excited to be here.

Susan Quinn: Well, you have a pretty long bio, and we will certainly put that in the show notes, but I would love for our listeners to hear the amazing background that you have that has gotten us to where we are today, to speak about your area of expertise. So, take it away.

Lena Sisco: Okay. I'm gonna give you the short version, but I will start by saying, I have this analytical mind. I always have had it, and I've always had this ability to connect with people. My whole thing was how can I really foster effective relationships? How can I win over trust from people? How can I read people? And so, I have the intuition, and that took me to what I thought was going to be my dream job as an archaeologist. I got to dig up things, put things together, use my analytical mind, but the major piece that was missing was that human-to-human interaction. And so, I thought, ooh, I don't know if this is what I wanna do all my life. Fast forward, I went to Brown University. I got my masters in archeology, still deciding what I was gonna do when I grew up, and I had a friend convince me to join the Navy reserves. Never in a million years—I'm gonna add 2 million—have I ever thought about joining the military. No one in my family's military, so it was never a thought in my mind, and when he came to me and said, I think you should join, I was like, oh, no, absolutely not. But then I thought about it, I'm like, well, wait a minute, why not? It's a challenge. And so, I joined the Navy Reserves, and that was the best decision I've ever made in my life. I had no idea that it was going to forge my career. I had been in for about a year and a half, and I had a commander come up to me—I was very young, I was a Seaman, very low, ranking—and he said, hey, Seaman Sisco, we have an opportunity for you, and it's the first time that females are gonna be allowed, the first time your low rank is gonna be allowed, and Navy reserves, because this is the Marine Corps, and they wanna train Navy reservists to be interrogators. And I thought, oh, that sounds a little scary, but okay, I'll listen to them. And I listen to them on

Saturday afternoon, and Saturday evening I said, Sir, thank you so much for thinking I would be awesome at this, but I gotta say, no, this is not something I'm gonna do [laughter].

Susan Quinn: [Laughs]

Lena Sisco: I don't wanna go to war, don't wanna live in a tent. This is not my thing. And I just went home that night, and I thought about it, and I thought, wait a minute, this is another challenge that approached me. My first no ended up being something amazing, what if this does, too? So, I went back Sunday morning, I said, yeah, sign me up. And that just launched my whole entire new life and my new career. I loved interrogation for the whole purpose because I got to use those two things that I love: being analytical but also communicating and interacting with people, and convincing them, persuading them to like me, trust me, so I could get information that would help save lives, that would help keep the world safe. And, for me, I was like, yes, this is what I'm meant to do. This is my why. And here I am today [laughter].

Susan Quinn: So, an interrogator, how long ago was that career?

Lena Sisco: Ooh, it was a while ago... It was right after 9/11, so I was in Gitmo. I went there in 2002 to 2003, and afterwards I was mobilized, so I got deployed for a year. I was still a reservist, and I went to work for a couple of three letter agencies, and then I went to the contracting world, but I always focused to my work in training government and agency people and military people in interview, interrogation, body language, and elicitation. And then, finally, I created my own company. And so, now, I can take those skills and teach anybody, any civilian, business leaders especially, entrepreneurs, small business owners, because the information and the techniques I teach people help you to make better decisions. They're gonna help, you know who to trust and who not to trust.

Susan Quinn: Lena, you have written a new book where it's coming out about commanding the conversation, and we've had a little bit of fun before we hit the record button here that it's a full body experience, and this whole podcast is about creating better experiences. I'm wondering if you can share with us how-, I mean you start out as an archaeologist, that you move into the military. You're a certified interrogator. You now are blowing up the international keynote speaking circuit, and you are helping us figure out how the words that we use, all of the components, verbal, nonverbal, either put us in a position of strength, or maybe they actually diminish us. So, I would love for you to give us context of what do we do well as communicators and leaders, and where do we need to improve? And that could open up many, many things for you, and I'd love to just listen to all the ways that you are guiding us to do that one skill—which sounds easy to communicate—is incredibly, incredibly hard. Sometimes in a skill we have to always, we're never going to be perfect at it.

Lena Sisco: Oh, no, nope. It's constant work, and even for me. I will find myself inside a conversation, saying, why did I just think that? Why did I say that? Why did I do that? I know better, you know, but we're human, and we get emotional, and sometimes we take things personally, and sometimes we fear speaking up for ourselves or delivering honest truthfulness, because we know it might make someone feel uncomfortable. And so, my book, my fourth book I believe it is. My last one is Honest Answers, just got published a year ago, I think, with HarperCollins. My fourth book—which I have not submitted to my agent yet, but she knows it's coming—I want to call it Command Your Conversations, and it's really how to face any

uncomfortable conversation with confidence. So, this is getting rid of the fear, and, you know, we can use this in all facets of life. As a leader, you have to give feedback to your team, to your employees, to all of your peers. You have to give it up and down the chain of command, and sometimes giving feedback up people like, oh, no, I can't do that, but it has to be done. And feedback is both positive and constructive, and there's a lot of leaders that I work with and train who don't like to have those conversations because their inherent thought is the person I'm going to give this feedback to is not gonna like it. But then I tell them, I said, well, wait a minute, how do you know that? And first off, that's you being a mind reader, right? We're not mind readers. We don't know how people are going to receive our message. So instead of worrying about something that hasn't happened yet, just deliver the message and be the most effective communicator you can possibly be. That means your message is clear. There's no emotion behind it. There's no labeling, there's no judging, there's no accusations. There's empathy. There's understanding. There's also your ability to listen to people, and when you can bring all of those amazing skill sets to a conversation, you should never, ever fear having it, because the person on the other side should be thanking you for that conversation.

Susan Quinn: Hmm, that is interesting. So, they should thank you for having a conversation of how you need to do everything better, but yet, you're just grateful because you've done it clearly, without emotion. You've had a touch of empathy. Give me an example. Can you role play with me? Not to put you on the hotspot, but okay, I report to you, and I've got a lot of things that I need to do to improve my performance. And so, Lena, would be an example that is clear, no emotion and empathy.

Lena Sisco: So, you first, I love the Center for Creative Leadership's feedback model, and I use it to script out every conversation, because here's what it does, it takes the emotion out. If there is a behavior I have seen, maybe you show up to work late every single day. Alright, it's just, I see it. I observe it. The behavior that I'm going to provide feedback on has to be observable. So that means I have to tell you when I've seen it, the time, the day, whatever it is. And if it's a pattern I have to be able to present that, because what I can't do is say, Susan, I need you to show up to work on time and not have seen it, because you're gonna say, okay, but how do you know that I don't. So, it's almost like in order for me to be taken seriously and have all that fluff, I call it, taken out of the conversation, I will say, Susan, this week I've monitored your timecard or whatever, and it shows that you were arriving late every day. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, minimum 15 minutes late. The impact that it has is that you're not putting in a full day of work. You may have the perception for other people, saying, you know, is it fair that Susan shows up late? But it does have an impact on your work and the peers and colleagues around you. My request is that you show up to work on time, starting tomorrow. And if there's a way that I can help you do this, let me know. I will help you. And so, it's so clear. I've seen it. This is the impact that it has, and now I need you to change it. It's without saying, oh, Susan, you're a bad person. You need to do this. And also, take out that you need. Nobody wants to hear you need to. That's just gonna set somebody up to putting those walls up. So instead, you just be very clear with that message.

I got delivered a hard pill to swallow years ago. I write about it in my first book because it was that critical to me, and I'm so thankful. One of my students, back in the day when I was training interrogators, came to me, and at the end of this 3-month course, and it was super intensive, both for the Instructor Cadre and for the students. And she came to me and said, I have to give you some feedback. And it was, listen, some people didn't like you in the class, and they thought

you were very insensitive and too dominant of a communicator. And at first, I got defensive, because my whole goal was to make sure they were all trained to be amazing so when they deployed, they were gonna stay safe, and they were gonna do an awesome job. And I felt like, oh, my gosh, after all that energy and how much I cared about this student cadre, this cohort, that's what they feel. And I was like, wait a minute, put that aside, let me listen to this feedback. And then I started asking questions. Well, what was it that I did, how did I behave that the students thought I was insensitive? And the light bulb came on, I was like, oh, I know exactly what it is, and I was like, you know what? They're right and thank you very much. I have some internal work to do. And man, that launched me on a huge other part of my career where self-awareness is paramount. We have to be so critically self-aware of our personality preferences, and our traits, and what we do when we're really stressed out, so, you know, you can take a million personality assessments out there. I like Myers Briggs type indicator, but they're all wonderful, and they will all tell you about you. And for me, I am an ENTJ, so being that TJ, the Thinker and the Judger, I like to have everything super organized, and if something has to change at the last minute, it's gonna stress me out and I'm gonna get angry. And I'm a thinker, so I make a lot of decisions based on facts and analysis, not how it makes people feel. I was like, that's why I was insensitive because I was so stressed during that time that I dug my heels into my personality type, because that's who I am, inherently, and it just wasn't the way to be at that moment. So, I started really working on my empathy.

Susan Quinn: Yeah. What is holding the mirror up? I don't know what you're seeing, but the bit of the 360 reviews.

Lena Sisco: Yeah.

Susan Quinn: I mean, you mentioned Myers Briggs— I'm an EI. I'm literally on the line, I and TJ. And it has given me success, and it has caused some people look at me, like, you know, you're a little too bold, it's time for you to leave the room, and I get that. And if that feels like negative energy to someone else, then they don't wanna listen, and it was interesting, Lena, you were talking about the arriving late, and my brain is listening, thinking, oh, my gosh, in today's world, everybody wants flexibility, and no one wants to come in when they want to. And so, I'm thinking, well, is there another example how to use that? Because right now I feel like we have to be everything to everyone at every single moment, and the reality of it is, we can't.

Lena Sisco: There's no way, we can't [laughter].

Susan Quinn: And at some point, we have to decide what are the guidelines for you being effective in your role, have we defined your role clearly, and then is there open communication to make sure that you have what you need to do your job well, and there's a safe place to discuss it. And so, I love that you talk about be clear, lose the emotion. The empathy part that you have someone's back, do you think that has, if you were to rank that, are they all equal? Or is there one that you would put above the other, and like you even said this self-awareness, like everyone, has to be self-aware.

Lena Sisco: Yes, and here's what self-awareness does, though, it makes us aware of all the differences out there. So, now I understand that I'm this one type, and these are my preferences. Well, guess what? There's other types of preferences. So, I may be working with someone who's more of a feeler, and because I'm a T, we may clash in a conversation or planning a project. If

I'm working with a perceiver, somebody who's a little more flexible in their guidelines and their timelines, we are definitely gonna be clashing. And sometimes if I don't understand their type, I may be labeled as a micromanager. And if I don't understand they're a perceiver, I may label them as a slacker. And this is what our brain does. Our brain wants to make sense of everything all the time. The unfortunate thing is, if it doesn't have the correct information, it will make it up. And that's where the judging and the labeling and the mind-reading comes in, and the making up a story. And usually that story puts us as the victim, and it usually puts us as, well, I did what I was supposed to do, you didn't, and it makes it really difficult. So, I always tell people you have to be an investigator. If someone's behavior doesn't make sense to you, talk to them. People are not scary. Well, most people aren't. Don't be afraid to have a conversation with people. Talk to them and bring up the fact that they distribute an observable behavior that doesn't make sense to you, or just ask them about how they feel, about you, about how you are leading the project, about your leadership skills, whatever it is, because once you ask somebody those questions, they feel they have a voice, and if you make people feel heard and appreciated, they will talk to you, money back guarantee. Because that's what everybody wants. Every human wants to feel that. So, give that. I'm always saying, you know, there's different leadership models out there. There's modeling the way, there's the servant leadership, there is the transformational leadership. I just say, listen. You have to have your critical communication skills, and with that will naturally come your leadership qualities and abilities. But with the communication like we talked about, that whole body experience, there's a lot of components to it. It is your thoughts, it's your feeling, it's your emotions. It's being able to actively listen to people, and listening doesn't mean you agree or comply, listening is listening to understand. And then also being empathetic, being able to deliver a message without fear, without feeling, ooh, I have to shy away from this feedback, or I have to shy away from saying that because they may get upset. Well, if it has to be said, it has to be said. And again, if you have that person's trust, you can say anything. I always like to tell people my job was to put people in prison for committing crimes, and they would tell me everything they did and thank me afterwards because it felt good to confess, knowing they were going away to prison for life.

Susan Quinn: Wow, oh, my gosh [laughter]. That is commanding the conversation for sure. If you can deliver that with empathy, and then they thank you for it, you are masterful at what you are doing. Lena, let me ask you this. You talk about critical communication skills, and it was commanding your thoughts, and how you deliver it verbally and non-verbally and where do you see—and I'm going to say all human beings, leadership is a mindset not a title in the world that I hope exist around all of this—where do we make the biggest mistakes as human beings? Because you said we're all the same. We all want to be seen, heard, and connected.

Lena Sisco: Yeah. I think our biggest mistakes come from thought distortions, and I can throw out a few, and I bet every listener out here is going to resonate with at least one of them. I know I do them, and sometimes it's all or nothing thinking. And that is I working on a project, or I've been doing something in my career, and I've been really good at it, and all of a sudden, I make one really bad mistake. One thing. Like the feedback I just shared with all of you that I got. Does that make me a horrible instructor, a horrible program manager? No. It's one thing that happened, and I'll fix it, and now I can learn from it. But all or nothing thinking means oh, gosh, I made that mistake. I'm done. Other ones are really confirmation biases. If we have a belief in our head, we're going to seek out the information that only confirms that belief. And sometimes, if people give us information that goes against that belief that we have, we will discard it. And a belief is simply a thought we keep thinking over and over again, so now we have to tap into what

am I thinking? What are those thoughts? Thoughts drive human behavior. Our thoughts drive, how we communicate to people, drive our emotions, drive our actions, everything. So, if we have thought distortions going on like making up a story, we call it being a mind reader, or crystal ball, gazing, right, predicting the future. I know I'm going to get fired because of X, I know Jan will get the promotion over me because of Y. Do you really know that? And what we're doing is we're setting ourselves up for failure. We're setting ourselves up to play the victim, to be upset, to get stressed out. Why would we do that to ourselves? So, our thoughts can be impacted by thought distortions. We need to take control of those thoughts and actively persuade them or think the positive things. And if we start to make up a story, we just gotta put it aside and say, you know what? I'm gonna have a conversation with this person, and I'm gonna get the information I need, so I don't have to make up a story about them.

Susan Quinn: You talk about thought distortion, let's say an extreme extrovert is managing an extreme introvert, and are we thinking, oh, why are they so quiet when they are just happily analyzing what they're doing, and is that the battle, if you will, that goes back and forth where the energy level is different versus the communication. Does energy play into communication? Kind of that nonverbal.

Lena Sisco: Absolutely, absolutely. And I'll give you a great example. So, crossing your arms, a lot of people instantly think if someone's crossing their arms as they are listening to you, that is defensive, or they're tuning you out, right? Which it could be, that person could be defensive, but it also could be that person's preferred posture, because it's just comfortable. It also could be cause their hands are cold, and they're crossing their arms and tucking in their hands. It also can mean this: they want to stay focused so that they can pay attention to what you're saying. We start judging that person and saying, oh, they're not listening to me! Oh, my gosh! I'm not being heard. They're starting to judge what I'm saying. And so, there's tons of that, even with the introvert, extrovert, if you understand that their personality preference is towards introversion, then it's gonna make sense as to why they're not making that much eye contact, why they have a quiet body language. Why they may have their head lowered, but to them they're actively listening to you. But when you truly understand that person's communication style, their personality traits, how they make decisions, you really start to understand and have effective communication, because all the unknown is answered.

So, instead of guessing as to why people are acting differently, or acting in a way that doesn't make sense to us, have a conversation with them about it, and they may, if it's a comfortable environment and there's trust between those two people, there should be no hesitation between either the leader, the subordinate, the manager, the supervisor, whatever, to be open and say, yeah, this is what's going on.

Susan Quinn: Well, you make a really good point. You have to ask. You have to make people feel comfortable. You have to want to build a relationship. And if you don't, then it's hard to further and grow anything, yourself, your team, your company, your community in general. But I think people are afraid, and you use that word early on, to have the conversation, and if we can learn to do that and not be judgmental and decide for someone else, seek to understand, we will continue to build better leaders. What's the purpose for you? Why are you spreading this fabulous word?

Lena Sisco: Well, my why, my purpose, as I tell people, because my background is so heavily

rooted in criminal investigations and, you know, the interrogations, it was for stopping bad people from doing bad things. It's safety. I want people to feel safe when they're out in their neighborhoods, when they're traveling, when they're, you know, wherever. I want people to be able to have the conversation because here's what I want. I want business owners to hire people they can trust and who aren't gonna steal from them. I want leaders to feel like, wow, my team can depend on me, and they'll follow me into battle, instead of plotting their demise behind their back. And it's just being able, any person going into the work environment, into a new job or a new career, to have that confidence without fear, to have those conversations, to make them grow personally is brilliant. And I never got taught that. If I go back into how I climbed the ladder it was more fear-based. It was do this, and you better do it awesome, and don't ask any questions. Okay, you know. Yes, sir, no, sir, yes, ma'am, no, ma'am, and there were no conversations about how do you feel? There was none of that back in the day. And so those conversations, I think, can really help us understand people at a deeper level, forge those trusting relationships.

Susan Quinn: Well, you make a good point, back to what's your why and it's this whole safety component. I was just listening to someone speak couple of weeks ago, and I don't have the exact name of the class, but he said that the top class that students take, and I'm not going to name the higher Ed, it's around having purpose and meaning in life.

Lena Sisco: Wow.

Susan Quinn: And you can barely get into the class because everyone is fearful. Everyone is seeking purpose. Everyone is trying to find a better way to communicate and do it better, which I think is such an interesting...

Lena Sisco: Yeah.

Susan Quinn: I've been a business owner for almost 40 years. This is new stuff for us. I think we hear so many bad things, but back to the work that you're doing. I didn't have that type of a mentor when I was coming along. It was a yes, ma'am, no, ma'am, and I think we are creating better ways to show up as human beings with this type of ongoing education cause it is a full body approach. And you may know this math, but is it like 95% of what we say and do in are verbal and non-verbal is without thinking, and we're only thinking about it 5% to do all of those critical communication skills. So, wow, can we rewire the brain to do them better? Or are we just whatever has shown up after 18 years, that's what it's gonna be.

Lena Sisco: No. I think we can rewire it, and I also have articles on change the brains chemistry like it's scientifically proven that we can actually do this, too. So, there's so many tools out there. But here's the thing, if you're not aware of those tools or that information, then you don't know it. It's unintentional blindness, right? I don't see what I don't expect to see. I don't know what I don't even know what's out there to know. So why would I think I'm not aware or missing information. But when you start peeling back the layers and you hear about mirror neurons and thought distortions and self-awareness and studying the personalities and really getting in touch to how your preferences and traits impact your communication techniques, you're gonna go deeper and deeper and deeper into techniques and tools that we can use to change that brains chemistry, to actually start tapping in and change our natural triggered thoughts on stuff, change those thoughts. I'll give you the best example, and I know we're coming to the end. I always when I host my classes, I ask people how many people have ever been cut off in traffic? And of course

everybody's raising their-, right who hasn't. And then I ask, how does it make you feel? And I can tell they're hesitant because they don't wanna say, well, I get mad. I get angry. And so, I say, well, listen, I'm not scared. I'm gonna tell you right now, I get super mad. I start swearing in the car, and if I'm really angry I'll give you the Italian salute, I call it, which is not a nice thing [laughter].

Susan Quinn: [Laughs]

Lena Sisco: I won't demonstrate it so, and everybody laughs. But truly that's what happens to me. And then I asked the class what made me angry. I'm not afraid to say it, I have emotions. And they say, well, it's the fact that they could hit you. I said possibly. It's the fact that, you know, they were disrespectful, and they weren't paying attention. Possibly. But I was like, there's one thing, one thing that made me angry. Only one thing. What is it? And they struggle, and they're thinking, I said, I'll even help you out. It's one word. And that word is my thoughts. That's it. Because when I get cut off in traffic, I do think, how dare you? You could hit my car. Why weren't you paying attention? Those thoughts create my emotion and my reaction. Therefore, the consequences follow. Now, think of this. The next time I get cut off in traffic I purposely choose to change those thoughts to they probably just didn't see me. I'm probably in their blind spot, or they're rushing to take their child to the emergency room. Guess what happens. I don't get angry anymore. Those thoughts don't make me angry. And so, everyone, you know, it's so foundational, so simple. And people are like, Wow! And then I tell them this, and nobody likes to hear this, there's not a human being in this world that can actually make you feel an emotion. People can't make you happy. They can't make you angry. There's only one person who can do that, and that's you, and it stems from the thoughts you think about a person, a situation, an event.

Susan Quinn: Yeah, it begins with our thoughts.

Lena Sisco: Yeah.

Susan Quinn: One of my favorite all time books—it's an oldie, but a goodie. People ask me all the time what are some of your favorite business books? Think and Grow Rich by Napoleon Hill. It was written back in the thirties, and I have read it multiple times. It's not a chapter to chapter, but it is, you think about the power of thought. And it's not rich in money, but it's rich in thought and rich in how that thought can navigate a happier world, you know, truly, for all of us.

Lena Sisco: Truly can. Listen, every morning if I wake up on the wrong side of the bed, or you know, the animals have done something crazy and created chaos and a mess, I gotta let it go. It's just a mess, I got this. And I have to reset any possible thought that can set me up for a very negative day, and I immediately dissect it right then and there, and I reset myself.

Susan Quinn: And we choose. Lena, let me ask this question. How do you better your best? In an already successful career you could have stopped, you know, back in the day as a certified interrogator, helping keep us all safe. What do you do that keeps bettering you?

Lena Sisco: I ask for feedback. I ask why people read my books, what they liked about my class. I research, I continually read, I listen to podcasts. It's constantly being open to remaining a student in life. That's my motto.

Susan Quinn: It has been an honor, truly, to be with you today. We will make sure to put ways to

contact you, your different books that you have written in the show notes but thank you for what you are doing.

Lena Sisco: And thank you for having me. I really enjoyed this.

Announcer: Thanks for being part of our best-in-class community. And until next time, keep bettering your best.

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