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(Intro Music)

Robert Glazer: Welcome to Elevate, a podcast about achievement, personal growth and pushing limits in leadership and life. I'm Robert Glazer, and I chat with world class performers who have committed to elevating their own life, pushing the limits of their capacity, and helping others do the same.

Lenox Powell: This episode was previously recorded and published as part of the Outperform Podcast

Robert Glazer: Hey, everyone. I'm Bob Glazer, AP's founder and managing director. Today's quote is from George Washington Carver, which is, "When you can do the common things of life in an uncommon way, you'll command the attention of the world." Our special guest today, Dr. Abdul-Malik Muhammad, is someone who is approach creating change in the lives of others in a very uncommon way. Dr. Muhammad currently serves as the vice president of several educational, mental health, and human services organizations and is the founder of Akoben. He also holds a black belt in traditional Japanese martial arts and is an aspiring guitarist, and as I also just learned, home renovator. Welcome, Dr. Muhammad. We're honored to have you with us today.

Dr. Muhammad: Thank you, Bob. It's a pleasure to be here. I appreciate it. Thank you.

Robert Glazer: You have an amazing personal story, which I got a window into when I first heard you speak. I'd really love if you could share a bit about your background and how you came to be where you are today.

Dr. Muhammad: Sure, sure. I'd love to. Maybe a good place to start is when I share this story, I always sort of preface it by saying it's really one of triumph so far, right, that too often we'll hear of a narrative or a trajectory and it's situated in sort of all of the bad things that may happen to a person and how they personally overcome. My story is a little bit different in that any of the triumphs and victories that I've been able to have have really been collective. I think that that's important and something that I've always been mindful of. I was born into a family of poverty. I was born three months after my biological father passed, and so a very rocky road, really challenging initial years. By the time I was eight-years-old, we were homeless and would remain so throughout much of my childhood. I had a lot of externalizing behaviors. The first time I was arrested, I was 10-years-old, and really troubling and challenging turbulent years in early adolescence, in and out of juvenile detention centers, in and out of shelters.

But by the time I was 14-years-old, my parents, my mother, and then step-father, decided to try to save my life and move us away from the particular area

where I was living, or where we were living, into a small town. That would really be a pivotal moment for me, not that it was discontinue my externalizing behaviors, but that I would now begin to be centered inside of a community that would approach me a little bit differently. I would also sort of be exposed to things like overt racism, sort of rural poverty, which were really interesting in my own transformation.

It was through that process of some things that I talk about as this formula for change that really began to instrumentally impact my life so that by the time I would graduate from high school, I would be able to get an academic scholarship, be the first person in my family to go on to school, eventually start a family while in undergrad, and then several years later, both, my wife and I would get our doctorates, her in clinical psychology and I in education, and really change the trajectory not only of ourselves and our immediate family, but more of our extended family, as well. It's been an interesting struggle, but really, a collective one. I call myself a community project because it took a lot of people to really lift me up.

Robert Glazer: Well, we're gonna get a lot into the how you did that because I think that's where the lessons on performance are really helpful and where I took really a lot about that, but just a question before we dive into that. What led you to found your current company, Akoben, and what does the name mean?

Dr. Muhammad: Sure, sure. Akoben is actually a symbol. It's an ancient Adinkra symbol usually found in West Africa, and it sort of translates into war horn, and so the idea is that it would be a horn that would sound to bring the community out to serve. And so in 2012, as I was leading several school operations and mental health organizations across a number of states, I was being approached by school districts and organizations to share some insight, some coaching, some training with leaders, in particular, on human transformation and organizational transformation, and rooted in work like restorative justice, trauma informed care, cultural relevancy, and so that birthed Akoben. We needed an organizational framework to approach this work. In 2012, we started our first contracts in Delaware, where I live, and then since then, we've been able to secure contracts and work with organizations throughout the US and into Canada, helping now thousands of folks really think deeper and differently, perhaps, than traditional ways of thinking about how we do human services and in organizational leadership.

Robert Glazer: Fascinating. One of the things I think leaders struggle with the most, well, leaders, and parents, and everyone, is how to affect change and getting others to change.

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah.

Robert Glazer: When I heard your story and I heard you recently speak at a leadership event, what struck me, you talked about a formula that you've discovered for driving people to lasting change. I know this formula has sort of been born working with

some of the most difficult kind of situations and people coming. This isn't your garden variety change. This is people coming from really difficult situations. I'd love for you to dive in, share that formula with our listeners, and talk a little bit about how it came about, how you've road tested it, and how it can be applied, both, in social services, and business, and all kinds of leadership.

Dr. Muhammad:

Yeah, yeah, no, that's great. I love the way you phrase that sort of not garden variety change, right, because I think what ... To quote Freeman Hrabowski, who is the President of University of Maryland Baltimore County, one of the things that I think that he has beautiful things that he has said, and he's said many, was that all of our easiest problems have already been solved, right, that we need our greatest and brightest minds to think about our most challenging issues and challenging problems. And so when we talk about change, it's not garden variety. We're not looking at change of degrees. We're really looking about change of kind and qualitative change. And so when we were approaching some of the work that we do in alternative schools, so these are schools and environments where young people have been removed from their traditional school placements due to, often, negative externalizing behaviors, aggressiveness, et cetera.

Those are the young people that we are working with, or some of the programs that we work with with people in recovery, or parents in trying to work with children and their own families to change some of the maladaptive behaviors that they see there or are experiencing, but then also in organizations that are failing. How do we beat back what would feel like the inevitably of, perhaps, closing an operation? How do we overcome that? And so, we were asking ourselves these questions as we were having some really good outcomes, right? We were serving young people, we were serving organizations, and we were beating back the odds. We were changing trajectories, and we were asking ourselves, how? How was this happening? Because we had really good ... We stumbled into some really good action and some good outcomes, but we had not really developed the formula to be able to replicate it.

Ultimately, we, I think, have a more responsibility to, if we're doing really good work, to do more of it and to do it in greater spaces. And so, when we thought about this work and when I began to delve into my own autobiography, I really began to uncover this notion of a formula for change. The formula is a simple one, but we think it's pretty powerful when we really begin to explain it. That is that connection plus challenge equals change. Again, connection plus challenge equals change. And so, we spent a bit of time talking about connection and talking about challenge, and then how that really leads to change and beyond just superficial change, but more lasting impactful change. I can certainly unpack some of that for you, Bob, if you'd like.

Robert Glazer:

Yeah, I guess the first ... And it really resonated with me and realized that I think subconsciously, look, it's hard to get people to change. I always tell a lot of people that if they don't want to change, they're not going to change.

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah.

Robert Glazer: But at the same time, my style has been challenging and I realize that the Friday Forward emails that I wrote, sort of, that was the life of me. I said, you know what? I think that's ... Why do these work? I think I've developed some connection, but they're definitely challenging. There's a lot of people I know who ... Kim Scott's Radical Candor is very popular now. There's a lot of people who just don't want a challenge and they want it to be easy. I think you clearly proved that that's not part of it. I mean, maybe in unpacking a little more, could you start with, what happens when you have one without the other?

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. That's where we've been able to trace some of the greatest failures, right, in our change efforts, whether it's personal change effort, right, where we're trying to lose weight, right, but we don't challenge ourselves enough or we don't have connection and support, right, or we don't have connection to the goal, itself, right? The goal is just the number where it's not meaningful, and so that's where the notion of sort of the enduring why, right, comes in and some of the work that Simon has done and others.

But when we have worked with organizations and worked with individuals, and we're talking about these change efforts and initiatives, when we violated this formula, you have connection, i.e. you've got strong relationships. You are able to be there for people. There's a lot of love, right, however that manifests itself in the work environment, of personal family, et cetera. There is that sense of we belong together, we really enjoy each other, that there's relationships. But often inside of those, we decide to take the easy road and we don't have the difficult conversations. We pass on leveraging those relationships to actually call and hold people accountable.

And so therefore, it becomes, as my good friend, Govan [inaudible 00:11:44] says, "No progress, no problem." There's no progress towards achievement and performance, and you know what? There's no problem. We're still good. We're all good. That's what happens when you have this violation of the formula leading towards the connection, but then also equally as challenging or equally as detrimental as when we have challenge. We have to challenge the atmosphere in the absence of connection. That's what we see with things like discipline disproportionality when we look at the data and we see there's certain young people that are disciplined much more harshly, much more differently, than other students are.

That's what happens when we have environments where it's command and control, and leaders are all about their way or the highway. It's do what I say because of positional authority, but they lack moral authority and they don't have the relationships. And so therefore, when people leave, they're quitting their boss. It's often because of the challenge and the absence of connection. What connection does is it gives us the leverage ability to challenge deeper. What challenge does is if we do it well, it can actually build and develop connections even stronger.

Robert Glazer: I think you put it ... I mean, you earn the right to challenge by first developing the connection, right? Connection comes before challenge?

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah, I think it's interesting. Humans are complex, right? There's so many ways and times in which it's through the challenge that we can actually connect, and it's also in the connection, even first that we can challenge more, but I think they go simultaneously. There's a synergy there. I don't think you have to have 6 months, 10 months in to connect and build relationships before you can challenge. I've been able to challenge folks that I've met, but do it in a way that it actually still maintains or builds connection between us.

Robert Glazer: Yeah. Switching to the work scenario for a minute, I mean, one thing I'd love to get your perspective on, thinking about this, is generationally and how this has adapted on parenting styles. We have a group of people, and I don't know it's a, I'll say millennial or not millennial, but we definitely have a group entering the workforce that has been helicopter parented or snowplow parented, as I heard a principal refer to it recently, no longer hovering. Let's just get everything out of the way.

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah.

Robert Glazer: In which there has been a lot of connection, but very little challenge at all. This is showing up on the doorsteps of companies and managers who now really have to deal with people who have been very nurtured, but never challenged, and it's difficult for them. I mean, what have you seen there? What advice would you offer in those situations? Because I've heard countless stories about this. Some folks who really have ... They've been encouraged their whole life, but have never been challenged and adversity has been moved out of the way for them.

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah, absolutely right. We can see the pendulum swinging the other way where, certainly, we can look at a time period in parenting, and of course this is the interface and intersection of culture, right, and ethnicity plays into this, as well. But years ago, we would see parenting as all challenge, as about rules, and it's better for children to be seen and not heard, and it's about obedience. Then, of course, a wave of other thinking came in and the pendulum has swung the other way where we do, unfortunately, have a growing ... Or maybe not growing, but I think that there's a body of parenting styles out there that are really about connection, clearing the path for any sense of failure, and the important lessons that young people learn from failure, and really this notion of protective, life protection.

I think a great quote by a gentleman named [inaudible 00:16:09], he said that accolades and pres preceding effort creates dependency and weakness. I thought that was so powerful because we will give the accolades and the pres preceding any effort at all. And so if we teach them that you can get, and I don't want to use the term the plastic trophies, or the rewards, or anything like that,

right, but I think even just the attaboys, you get the attaboy before you've even tried, or for showing up, right?

Robert Glazer: Oh, for sure-

Dr. Muhammad: Exactly.

Robert Glazer: I mean, my daughter had an invention convention, I don't know, six or seven years ago. I remember mine as a kid. I loved it. We made, my friend and I, we stuck a tube into a plastic bottle and ran it up the bike so you could drink out of it. It looked like things that kids made. We go to this invention convention at my daughter's school and half the stuff is made by the parents. The other half is not real. Oh, this is a food shrinker, and [crosstalk 00:17:19] you shoot a beam at it and it shrinks the food. Yeah, a teleporter for food, and then everyone is given a ribbon for showing up. I was just mortified by the whole thing in terms of, what are we teaching here? I mean, when you start giving awards for showing up, I think that's dangerous and it has a lot of negative implications of saying, hey, you should be praised just for showing up to work. I mean, I don't know if you read about ... We had a big foot of snow yesterday and Bill Belichick made a whole big deal that there was no excuses for being late at practice, no matter how hard it was to get to the stadium. He is the opposite of just do your job.

Dr. Muhammad: Right.

Robert Glazer: I mean, there's no praise for getting to practice. If you have to stay at the hotel, do it. Yeah, I find that stuff ... I think we're hurting kids more and more-

Dr. Muhammad: And I think what we've got to navigate is this 'cause what I think the praise just for showing up runs counter to are two things. One, I think, can be overstated in our society, right, that's sort of this notion of competition is supreme, right, that everything is about competition. And so therefore, how do people know that they've won, unless they beat someone? Well, I might challenge against that, right? But I think the other one is that when it's praise and accolades preceding effort, then we are ultimately abdicating our responsibility to hold young people accountable to do their very best. We're abdicating our responsibility as parents, as community members, as citizens, to teach right from wrong and that failure can, of course, be hugely profound and growing. I think that that's really important. That's where the challenge comes in that, of course, we earn that right by having that connection and sort of what I've said before is-

Robert Glazer: So is competition-

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah, I'll just say this.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, sorry, go ahead.

Dr. Muhammad: When you teach young people that they can be anything, but if we don't hold them accountable, then what will they be? Right? I think that that's really interesting.

Robert Glazer: Is competition part of the challenge? I'm finishing my second book and I just wrote a chapter on competition. I really think competition is essential, but not in the win-lose and you have to beat people. I think a lot of people are really competing against themselves, but I can't think of a lot of things in life that people will want, whether it is a girlfriend, a job, a house, something else that someone else ... That wouldn't want the same thing. You're gonna win and you're gonna lose, and I think you need to do both gracefully, but it's about how you show up and compete.

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah. Bob, it's interesting. I have a personal challenge in front of me right now. What I needed was the opportunity for me to say no to something to clarify exactly what it is that I wanted, but I needed there to be value in the second option in order for me to turn it down. I think for me, it was sort of this notion of competition, right, that I needed to have at least something of value to go against in order to clarify and deepen the sense of the win, right, whether ... My wife is beautiful and even more than her beauty is just her amazing mind and brilliance, but I have recognized that I've got to continue to give deposits into that relationship because she's a wonderfully hot commodity out there, right? I refuse to lose in that battle. I'm certainly not trying to commercialize or consumerize my wife, but I think there's this real notion of-

Robert Glazer: Monopolies don't-

Dr. Muhammad: [crosstalk 00:21:22].

Robert Glazer: Yeah. Look at an uncompetitive market and you will not-

Dr. Muhammad: Exactly.

Robert Glazer: Find much ignition at all until someone comes in and-

Dr. Muhammad: Absolutely.

Robert Glazer: And lights a fire under them. What are the implications of the connection plus challenge model for business leaders? Or how do you apply this with your own staff? Or how should people who are building a team or leading really think about? Because I do think, and I talk about my team and my job is to challenge them and to push them, but support them. I think a lot of leaders struggle with this. They either are good at the connection or they're good at the challenge, but they're not good at the combination. They're not getting the change. Maybe you can talk about how you with your own staff and then sort of how you've coached leaders and executives.

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, this is the perennial quest, right? This is the journey, whether as a parent, a leader, a business leader, community leader, et cetera. This intersection ... First thing is, we've got to have a common dialogue. We've got to be able to use terms, like connection plus challenge, in our regular vernacular. Then that way, we can hold each other accountable or what Goven calls volunteered accountability with each other. One thing that I often share is called the social discipline window. It's rooted in the work and movement around restorative practices and restorative justice. In the social discipline window, you can imagine an intersection of two lines, two perpendicular lines, one representing the line of control, or challenge, or power, and the other representing the line of support, or love, or connection.

This, of course, creates quadrants or four boxes. One thing that we talk about is looking at our decisions and seeing where they fall, and so in a space of low connection and low challenge, we call that the not box. That is because when someone is existing here, you've got very little connection or relationships going on, and you've got very little challenging, then this is the space of not really showing up, not being involved, and certainly not being effective. And so when we talk about some of our key decisions, whether it's as a parent or as a leader of an organization, a business, et cetera, when do we show up this way? When do we sort of bow out and we're an absentee landlord? We're not showing up as a leader. We've abdicated our responsibility to use our authority.

There are other times when I, and my natural default, is more towards the high control, the high challenge, and less or little, if any, support or connection. That is, unfortunately, a default style that I've had as a teacher, as a leader, that I've fallen into at times. That is what we call the to box, T-O, and that is when you are primarily using your authority by doing things to people. And so when I'm there, and I often find myself there in periods of stress where I go to management by crisis, I am extremely directive and very, very clear, and that works at times. But too often, I'm more comfortable there than I should be, and I begin to make excuses for my behavior as to why I need to be operating in that box. That's when I have people around me that we've trained in this framework and they're able to challenge me and say, "Well, Malik, let's pull back a little bit. It looks like you're being a to, and what's probably best for the team is to be a different way."

Robert Glazer: It's a bummer when you train people to call out your state.

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah, yeah. Then I get upset and say, "Don't use my stuff against me." Then they remind me, "Well, this was never your stuff, Malik, anyway." Then I'm really in a pickle. Then, of course, you've got, on the other side of that, you've got high control, a lot of relationships, a lot of connection, a lot of ... Excuse me, high connection, a lot of support, a lot of love, a lot of relationships, but very little control. That's very little accountability, very little expectations, and that's what we call the for box, F-O-R, and that's when you are using your authority by primarily doing things for people. The savior syndrome is out of this. The protect

them because they can't protect themselves. It's really rooted in their deficiency mindset and-

Robert Glazer: And it's similar to Kim Scott's Ruinous Empathy-

Dr. Muhammad: Absolutely.

Robert Glazer: I think, if you're familiar with it.

Dr. Muhammad: Absolutely.

Robert Glazer: Yeah. I think it's actually in the same place, too.

Dr. Muhammad: It is, yeah.

Robert Glazer: On the quadrant-

Dr. Muhammad: [crosstalk 00:26:06]. Yeah, Radical Candor is a great manifestation of this model, as well, right? And so, the challenge here, of course, is that we end up doing all the heavy-lifting for folks because of either expediency. It's easier for me to do it myself, but we ultimately disempower people, and we also are allowing them to sit on the sidelines when they need to be on the field and really participating, but the optimal place, of course, is high control or high accountability, high challenge, and high connection, high support, and high relationships. We call that the with box, and so what I always say is when, at the end of the day, it's 11:00 PM, it's 8:00 PM, it's three o'clock in the morning when we're reflecting on our day and those days in which we've been on our A game. It's primarily when we've been operating in that with box that we've held people accountable, we've been held accountable, but we've also been anchored inside of relationships, and people know that we care and are concerned for them, as well.

Robert Glazer: Yeah. I think people struggle to hold others accountable even more than the ... The irony is they're more comfortable with being held accountable-

Dr. Muhammad: Absolutely.

Robert Glazer: Than they are holding people accountable, which should imply that they should hold people accountable, but it doesn't.

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah, that's very true, right? I think it takes honor and integrity as a leader to look someone in the eye and let them know that they're missing the mark. They're not doing what they need to do, and of course open up how can you support them more, but also let the opportunity sit in that space of being uncomfortable and them knowing. We call it reintegrated shaming, but knowing that it's not okay how they've been acting, performing, et cetera, but they are

still a part of this relationship and that you're committed to them doing better, but there's also an expectation that they will do better.

Robert Glazer: I'm leading my business. I have an exciting new plan. We're gonna make a big pivot or change. We're gonna go forward. I'm all excited. I need people to change. Where do most business leaders go wrong in trying to affect change, either in their industry or with their teams?

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah, that's a great point. We can extrapolate how we do change beyond just the individual level to also how we roll out projects, initiatives, et cetera, right. We can roll out an initiative in any of these four boxes. When we roll out a new program, a new technology, and we essentially let it just sit there for people to approach it in whatever way they want to without direction, without expectation, without support, and our arms wrapped around them, then we do it in the not box. There's low control and low support. Other times, we make it a mandate that they color absolutely inside of the lines and there's often very little support or leeway to begin to sort of modify it in the way that's gonna be best used for the organization. That's doing it in the to fashion. I've been guilty of that, right, like this is the direction in which we're going. I want everyone to walk exactly this way. I really don't care about your idea to put a cute little flower on it or make it red. This is what it's going to be.

Again, that's appropriate at times, but too often, we overdo that. I certainly overdo that. Then there's other times in which we'll do initiatives where we roll it out, but there's very little expectation for them to adhere. It's almost to check a box, and so we end up doing all the heavy-lifting. But when we're doing initiatives of change, being in the weeds with folks to help them through the process, i.e. that support, at times, but then also letting them know, these are the non-negotiables and these are the areas of flexibility.

Robert Glazer: It's interesting. One of my favorite quotes on, I'm sure you've heard this, on change is the, "If you don't like change, you're gonna like irrelevance even less."

Dr. Muhammad: That's right.

Robert Glazer: Have you heard that one?

Dr. Muhammad: I've heard something similar. [crosstalk 00:30:26]. Yeah, I can't remember who it was, but it was something that if the rate of change on the outside is greater than the rate on the inside, you've got a problem, right?

Robert Glazer: I think that was Buffett. That might've been Buffett.

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah, yeah, you're probably right.

Robert Glazer: One thing I want to point out, and if the listeners really haven't made the connection already, you do a lot of your work in social services. We talk a lot

about business here, but I think the model is important and you probably understated the impact that you have, but you're talking about where if you can't affect change and the people that you're working in, their lives are at risk and their entire future is at risk, so it is paramount that you can figure out how to change. These are people who may not want to listen, or don't have a reason to listen, or you're not their boss. That is why I found this model really ... If it works in those sort of context, how can leaders tap into it when they have all the other advantages in their favor? It is, yeah, talk a little bit about the folks that are ... 'Cause I'm sure you see this, the really, the unwilling.

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah.

Robert Glazer: What do you do in social services when this person is just not gonna change and you see they're gonna ruin themselves, versus how does someone deal with that in a business context?

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah, yeah. No, Bob, that's a great one, and that's the space that I find myself in a lot, right, so navigating between when the price for continuing on with their particular trajectory is really high, so young people that-

Robert Glazer: It is not giving up a promotion.

Dr. Muhammad: Right, right, right, it's not [crosstalk 00:32:19] problems, right? It's the real challenge of, listen, if something doesn't happen now, then you run the risk of not living until age 21, right, that ... And I've, unfortunately, had to, over the past five years, bury 10 young men that I've worked with in our alternative schools in Delaware and elsewhere who were gunned down in the street and were victims of homicide. I've spoken at their funerals, and so the price there is really high. But what we found is, when we're working with those individuals, and those families, and folks that are in recovery, et cetera, that when we were turning around, so I was navigating going to a funeral and then turning around and going to a business meeting where I'm responsible for about 2,200 folks across nine states. I have also got that entrepreneurial space that I find myself in, and I own two companies, and I'm vice president of several others, and so trying to also understand, how do these principles apply in the business world, as well, where the price isn't as high, but the work is critically important, especially if it's work of substance and meaning to help the community.

And so, what we found is when the price is even higher, the responsibility for connection is even deeper. But, if we do it well and we develop these really interesting and profound skills and principles in connecting and building relationships, it doesn't take as long as we might think. Working with some folks that have some deep and pretty serious challenges in their life related to poverty, structural violence, racism, et cetera, and a lot of acting out behaviors, it didn't take years to connect with these young people and adults. It sometimes took minutes, and despite their trauma, but when we went into it with an open heart that they were actually able to see the value and what we were bringing and found that connection, and then challenging them minutes after that. Then

we did find, and have found, that the work inside of organizations is a little bit different in that they really want to be able to know that if they're gonna sit down with you as a consultant, as a coach, as et cetera, that you're able to understand the pain that they're going through, which you know just as well as I, businesses aren't the unique little snowflake that we sometimes think we are, that there are some universal challenges that we can apply across industries.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, to go back to something you said earlier, I think it sounds like neither situational leader needs to have the emotional intelligence to know what they need to challenge in order to earn that connection or they need to connect in order to earn the ability to challenge and it's probably a little bit different based on who they're talking to. Some people just have never been challenged before and everyone's told them what they wanted to hear, and therefore they don't connect because they don't respect those people, and vice versa, as well.

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah, yeah. I've found that when you're gonna ... I've had great experience when I'm challenging someone that I've got a relationship with and we've got a good connection, I'll often start that conversation sometimes with, "Hey, listen, I need to have a tough conversation with you. I'm not sure if it's gonna be tough for you."

Robert Glazer: It's both.

Dr. Muhammad: "It is for me."

Robert Glazer: The way you're saying it, it's both, yeah.

Dr. Muhammad: Exactly, exactly.

Robert Glazer: Even in the way you said that, the tone, you were sounding authentic, and connecting, and challenging at the same time.

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah, absolutely. Sometimes, the end result of that conversation is I've had to terminate someone, but that's how I started it. I need to have a tough conversation with you. Other times, it's really just to bring to their attention something that's not going well, and it's not always hugs and kisses afterwards, right? It's never kisses, sometimes hugs, but it's usually the sense of walking away from the conversation feeling that someone honored me and told me the truth. We all bandy around this notion of hey, listen, just be straight with me, be transparent with me, but then we turn around and aren't often that with the people that we're responsible to.

Robert Glazer: Yeah. I was really impacted early in starting Acceleration Partners by the work of Patty McCord and Netflix around being authentic, telling people the truth, and they can handle it. What I've come to see is I think people don't tell the truth because to protect themselves. It's hard for them and they can't do it or they feel bad that this person is not gonna ... They know that this person is not gonna

have a job at their organization, so they create this sort of dissociate of barrier where they now need to make this person into a bad person because that becomes the self-fulfilling prophecy for them.

Dr. Muhammad: That's right, that's right.

Robert Glazer: They have a hard time with the dissonance of this person is, or Dr. Muhammad is a great person, but he's just not the right guy for this role.

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah.

Robert Glazer: And so somehow in my mind, I gotta make him not right for this role and a bad person. The lack of respect, we've built a lot of problems by doing that.

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah. I mean, wow, Bob, you know something so powerful, right, that we have to dehumanize sometimes in order to allow us to do some things that are, what we perceive to be negative. If we're going into this process not that I need to have a tough conversation, but it's I'm gonna hurt somebody here, then what makes it easier, what makes that softer for us is seeing them not as a full human that we need to value and understand, but two things can exist at the same time. They can be a great human being and just in the wrong place. A good colleague of mine says, "Sometimes we have responsibility to give people back to the community." I.e., letting them go, right?

Robert Glazer: Yeah.

Dr. Muhammad: They can't be here any longer for a variety of reasons, but those two things can exist, that we can be good and still do things that are wrong and harm others. That's what the work of restorative practices does, is we can separate the deed from the doer and allow people to still remain a part of the collective, but address and hold them accountable for the things that they might've done wrong.

Robert Glazer: Respect becomes a big foundation of that, I think.

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah.

Robert Glazer: Whether you challenge respectfully or you challenge disrespectfully.

Dr. Muhammad: Exactly.

Robert Glazer: I think that probably makes all the difference.

Dr. Muhammad: Yeah. To something you said earlier about sort of just being open and honest with people and speaking truth to power. Unfortunately, we've got some folks that are very good at that, perhaps, but it's often a masquerade for them to just be a jerk. There's folks that are running around saying, "I just speak my mind

and I tell the truth." Well, no, you're just a jerk and you like harming people, right?

Robert Glazer: Right.

Dr. Muhammad: And you don't have that connection. What you've got is a lot of challenge, but you don't like being challenged often, either, so yeah.

Robert Glazer: The goal of feedback or challenge is to improve. It's not to make the person giving it feel better that they unloaded it off their chest.

Dr. Muhammad: Exactly.

Robert Glazer: It's to get a change in behavior. If you're just saying it to make yourself feel good or to feel inferior in some way, then that has ulterior motives.

Dr. Muhammad: Exactly, exactly. That's a good way to put it.

Robert Glazer: Well, we could talk for hours, but I want to start wrapping it up. I have one last question for you. You've overcome some major challenges in your life and this is the Outperform Podcast, so we like to ask everyone, what is your key to outperforming and helping others to do the same? What have you used to overcome the obstacles that you've had in front of you?

Dr. Muhammad: That's good. I kind of draw strength from a couple lessons that have been given to me. One was that endures in my mind that my mother was very fond of saying ... She, of course, got it from somewhere else, but I attribute it to my mom. That is this notion of if it's to be, it's up to me. And so, that is sort of this radical ownership that I have responsibility for my trajectory, that bad things will happen, they have happened, and I am in a space of being responsible, and certainly, I don't control all conditions, but I am responsible to how I respond. Then the other is when times get tough and they're really challenging, one of my favorite African proverbs is, "One does not abandon their part of the battlefield just because it has thorns." And so for me, that really helps me to remember that this space, this work that I'm doing, is going to be hard. It's going to be thorny. It's going to be challenging at times, but one does not abandon their part of the battlefield just because of that. We've been placed here in this space for a reason and we have a responsibility to uphold that, and respect that, and respond to that. All that I've been able to achieve, and hopefully there's a lot more ahead of me than is behind me, really, I think, marry the two of those.

Robert Glazer: Dr. Muhammad, thank you. It's been a pleasure talking with you about affecting change in ourselves and in others. As I mentioned, I'm deeply passionate about this subject and was really inspired by the talk you gave a few months back. To our listeners out there, we'll be sure to include the show notes in this episode. Maybe we'll get a copy of the graph that you talked about. I think the visual on that, the for and the we will really help everyone, and also links where you can

learn more about Dr. Muhammad, Akoben, and the incredible work that they are doing to improve the lives and communities around them. Until next time, thanks for listening and keep outperforming.