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FacilitatorU Expert Series Interview:
Kathleen Paris, Ph.D, author of *Staying Healthy in Sick Organizations: The Clover Practice™*

Interview Conducted by
Neerja Arora Bhatia, FacilitatorU.com

*In this week’s Expert Series Interview, Kathleen talks about her new book and The Clover Practice™*

→ Neerja began by commenting that many books point out problems, but few people have courage to write about solutions. She thanked Kathleen for addressing solutions in her book.

Kathleen talked a bit about the The Clover Practice™, which has been a touchstone for her life and work. There are three principles in The Clover Practice™ to help everyday in the workplace:

1) Tell the truth always. It is important to do this, even if it is not convenient and even if we don’t look too good. Authenticity is essential.

2) Speak for yourself. Kathleen reminds us to “speak from the corner of the world you know.” It is important to realize that we truly construct our own reality, and to give others room for others to speak from their corner of the world too.

3) Declare our interdependence. We need to acknowledge that our success in an organization depends on others.

As we work on the The Clover Practice™, Kathleen reminded us that it is simple but not easy and “No one can do this perfectly, but it’s the striving for it that nets the value for individuals.”

When asked where the inspiration for The Clover Practice™ came from, Kathleen indicated that these principles just showed up for her. The first principle came to her through a personal life experience, in which she learned the value of telling the truth as we know it. In working through the personal situation, the healing began. This was also the time in her life when Kathleen began her consulting work.

As a consultant, Kathleen recognized the importance of speaking for yourself. This allows you to speak your truth and makes it safer to work with the group in getting at the truth. Speaking your truth based on what you have heard, seen, felt, experienced allows you to tell the truth as consultant without getting kicked out!

In relation to interdependence, Kathleen noted that her practice in organizations lead to the third part of the clover. She realized that our personal success is dependent on others in the same organization being successful. She contrasted this with the internal competition that is common in modern organizations.
Neerja asked what it means that most organizations are sick.

Kathleen asked us to compare a sick organization with a sick person – an individual may not be feeling that well and is perhaps as a result, not that productive. We can liken this to an organization, in that if it is not healthy, it cannot produce what it theoretically could if it felt better, communication may be sluggish, and small things can cause big problems. The same afflictions that hurt organizations can also hurt individuals.

Neerja asked what has created unhealthy organizations.

Kathleen believes there are three culprits that contribute to unhealthy organizations:

1) Addiction to hierarchy, patriarchy and command and control management, where decision-making is not close enough to the action.
2) The way we think about leadership. People without the right skills are managing people. About 55% of managers/supervisors do not have skills or qualifications to supervise other people, according to research. If we continue to think of management as a class of people, we will never provide training and support they need to be good at it.
3) A willingness to continue illusions (examples include: we’re fine as we are, we can use up as much environmental resources as we want to, etc.). These illusions keep dysfunctional patterns going.

Neerja asked Kathleen what evidence she has that organizations are sick.

Kathleen cited the accelerating failure rate of organization; the disengagement of employees in their work (70% are not fully engaged) the stress level that people feel from their jobs (80% of people say their job is a significant stressor and one million people do not show up for work each day due to stress); and the reorganization frenzy indicates that things are not working as they should. Kathleen also mentioned that the book title simply resonates with people; when they hear it, they get a look of recognition on their faces, since they realize that problems exist in the workplace.

Neerja asked for whom this book is intended.

Kathleen responded by saying that this is for the person on the front line. However, any leader can embrace the practice, and that it could help them be the best leader they could be.
Neerja asked: This book is about waking up – what do you mean by that?

Kathleen tells us that we are waking up to the fact that we are selling our labor, just as if we were offering the days and hours of our lives on eBay. Everyone should ask themselves “I am selling my labor, am I getting a good deal?” We need to be cautious not sell our labor for a return that is not worthwhile when we think about waking up to our wellness, we need to wake up to how our family history impacts us at work every day. We need to wake up to the part that we all play in our own problems. Everything is connected, and if we are in (and stay in) a dysfunctional situation, we are playing a part of it.

Neerja asked Kathleen to talk a bit about what to do when it’s not safe to tell the truth in the workplace.

Kathleen indicated that this situation is not that unusual. Chapter one of her book has some guidelines for assessing the safety for telling the truth. Kathleen also reminded us that if we are in a place where it’s not safe to tell the truth, it may be time to get out of there! Most people have many more employment options than they think they have, she said.

Neerja asked Kathleen to expand on this a bit – how is it possible to leave a toxic workplace in this economy?

Kathleen believes this is the perfect time to think about doing this. There are many options, including taking classes and exploring professional development and training, joining a professional organization and getting active in it. Consider asking people who are close to you “what am I good at?” Use career counseling services of local technical colleges. Do some soul-searching and prepare now for what might be next. She suggested not necessarily staying with something you happen to be good at.

Neerja asked Kathleen to talk a bit more about what she means by selling your labor and getting a good deal.

Kathleen talked about the similarity organizations have to a parent – child relationship. In that dynamic (a patriarchic system), you are colluding, if only by staying there. It is important to think about a more acceptable exchange than you experience in a hierarchical/patriarchic situation.

Neerja asked how realistic The Clover Practice™ is, and how long it took Kathleen to develop it.

Kathleen considers herself the test case for how realistic the approach is. She exclaimed that the principles have never failed her yet. This is her bedrock.
In regards to evidence that it works, Kathleen asks us to look at Fortune 500 companies – they take high road in regard to communications, hiring practices, etc., all things that align with The Clover Practice™, and they consistently outperform other organizations.

➔ Neerja commented that there are several places in the book where Kathleen mentions personal development. Yet change is scary, and personal development can be difficult. She asked Kathleen what words of encouragement she could give us on this path.

Kathleen suggested that mindfulness and simply being aware of what is happening around you can be a really good start. Listen to how people talk, and having an awareness of communication patterns can be immensely helpful. It is important to remember that it’s the striving that’s important – we can’t be perfect.

➔ Neerja asked how leaders and facilitators can become models for our groups to take this further.

Kathleen encouraged us to create a safe place for people to tell the truth. The facilitator can create this environment to enable full participation. We bring the message that everyone has their own truth, and it’s important to honor that. Many views are necessary and welcome. Facilitation needs to be committed to this thought.

The questions you ask determine what levels you can get to. The facilitator can help people defend their view of “the truth” by asking clarifying questions. This takes people out of the process and allows focus on the issues. Of course, modeling is critical and can be really powerful in relation to honesty.

➔ A comment from the audience was made about Kathleen’s remarks related to growing up.

Kathleen explained that the growing up process can be a wounding process. We’ve all had different levels of wounding. The wounding experiences usually carry themselves into our behavior as adults, and these unconscious behaviors don’t always work well in the workplace. Our childhood dysfunctional behaviors allow us to survive, but unless we become aware of them and work on them, we will carry them through adulthood. If we become mindful of this wounding, we can see our situations more clearly. In some cases, we may not even think we’re worthy of a better job.

For facilitators who take responsibility for work of a group, it is essential for us to do that type of work/healing. We need to do our adult homework.
Another audience member asked what would be major signs for folks interviewing with companies to key into when deciding if a company would be a good one to join.

Kathleen mentioned that this is not addressed in her book, but look for value statements for the organization. Ask the company about their approach to decision making, the role of individual employees, opportunities for professional development. These are give-aways for how companies think about their employees. Ask if the organization has applied for Baldrige Award, things like that.

Neerja commented that Kathleen’s aim is for people to have peace of mind, less stress, to be emotionally healthy, and then asked: what is emotional health?

Kathleen sees emotional health in 4 parts: know boundaries - what is ours to do and worry about; live in the moment, have peacefulness about the now; be helpful to others – there’s enough left over to share; be hopeful, have a trust that things will work out.

Neerja asked how we can get there.

Kathleen suggested starting with The Clover Practice™, taking care of your body; embracing meditation or a spiritual practice, and hanging out with healthy people.

Neerja asked about Kathleen’s idea that her book is for Americans working in America.

Kathleen explained that Americans seem to have the greatest disconnect in the workplace. As individual Americans we are expect to participate in our own destinies, but there is this disconnect when we go to work in feudal organizations. Kathleen would enjoy hearing perspectives from those in other countries, and how it would play out there.

Kathleen reminds us that we don’t have to wait for the system or others to be healthier for us to take the power to become healthier ourselves.

An audience member asked what advice Kathleen could give to businesses in response to the economic crisis without going into panic mode.

Kathleen remarked that the book was written for individuals, as that is what can change. In order to have long-term growth and gain, we need to nurture it and abandon our fixation on short-term financial return. If an organization adopted The Clover Practice™, we wouldn’t have the dishonesty, which could improve the organizations.

She said we probably need different economic organizations than today’s corporations.
Kathleen mentioned the iconoclastic book *The Divine Right of Capital: Dethroning the Corporate Aristocracy*, by Marjorie Kelly, for a discussion of the alternatives.

→ Neerja asked: who has influenced you?

Kathleen mentioned several authors:

- Deming – driving fear out of the workplace; that management’s role is to help people; transformation begins with the individual
- Peter Bloch – the limitations of hierarchy and patriarchy and command and control management. Innovation cannot thrive in top-down organizations
- Margaret J Wheatley (*Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*) – there are interconnection at all levels
- Peter Senge – systems thinking - we are all part of larger systems and impacts can occur far from the original action

Kathleen’s book *Staying Healthy in Sick Organizations: The Clover Practice*™ is available at Amazon.com

Her website is Kathleenparis.com; you can download first chapter of book and print Clover Practice™ bookmarks here as well