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| **Transcript of Ideas Podcast conversation between Adam Smith and Glenn Brooke**Adam Smith: In this episode of Ideas, I talk with Glenn Brooke about writing, leadership, mistakes, and much more. Here's our conversation. All right. Today's guest is Glenn Brooke. He's one of the smartest guys I know. I'm fortunate to have him as a leadership writer over on my website. I wanted to bring him on the show to talk about all things leadership and to hear his thoughts because I think it will be really valuable for everyone listening today. So Glenn, thanks so much for coming on the show. |
| Glenn Brooke: My pleasure. Glad I can be talking with your audience today, |
| Adam: Yeah. Absolutely. And your journey is interesting, so if you would, go ahead and share with us about your journey. |
| Glenn: Sure. So, born and raised in a rural part of West Virginia, but my mother was from Pennsylvania, so she “learnt me not to talk that a’way.” I was in fifth grade when I decided that I was going to win the Nobel Prize in Medicine for the molecular characterization of cellular differentiation. I wrote an essay about it, and my teacher didn’t even make fun of me. I was on a science track from a very early time, always interested in sciences and particularly in biology. So, that was the route I went through college, then I earned a PhD in molecular biology, and did some postdoctoral research work working as a scientist. Part of the way through that, I realized that I would never be a great scientist. I was not going to win a Nobel Prize. I would be competent. I could make a living at it, but I made the jump to working for a large corporation. I was in the bioinformatics area, really got into the computer stuff. I actually ran a small company writing software for scientists for a while. For the last 25 years or so, I've been with this company in different roles, mostly I've had large IT management types of stuff. I started a lot of writing, started publishing books around 2004. I’ve got 15 books now on a variety of topics. The leadership piece has always interested me. It's just been an interesting journey and getting to work for a large global company where I routinely hear four or five languages in a day. If you told me when I was a kid in West Virginia that's how my life would be, I wouldn’t have believed it possible. So it's been a real privilege to work in many disciplines with lots of people around the world. |
| Adam: That's great, and, I mean, you've managed different teams along the way as well, which speaks to your leadership knowledge. And we'll definitely get into in a bit, but I did mention on the intro that you have been writing for my site, and it's been a couple of years now. Something like 170 articles you've written for the site. You mentioned you authored 15 books. You had kept your own personal website for a while. You also have written articles for other sites. I think an interesting first question here would be really valuable for listeners as well, who are trying to create content for their own sites and other sites and write books, and just can't seem to get it all done. I really want to ask you here, what are some quick tips for listeners in that area of content creation that might help them realize their full potential and realize that is might not be as difficult as it seems? |
| Glenn: I think that's a great question, and I probably am a little more prolific than some people. I've got two strategies which fundamentally drive it. The first strategy is I try every day, seven days a week, to produce 500 words that are of publishable quality somehow. Now, some days I can do more than that, but I try to-- and to make 500 publishable words, I might need to write 700 or 1,000 some days. Other days, it's 512 words and it's pretty good. I think of it as a job and that's that I'm a writer and I come to it every day just cranking out stuff. Now they're some of those 500 words never get published because in the end they're just not that good or I haven't found a way to use them yet. But that discipline is really important. I think people try hard. I've done it too where you say, "Oh, this weekend I'm going to set aside Saturday afternoon and I'm just going to write." Well, I don't, in the end, get through a lot and it's been more productive for me to just focus on 500 words. I've got outlines. I've got ideas and scribble notes. So the second piece is I usually have a pen and a little notebook or something handy or my iPhone to record a quick video thought whenever I have any kind of an idea at all. However crazy, I try to capture it. As I'm getting older, I think I lose those ideas faster but I think for all of us good ideas have really low vapor pressure and they just disappear, evaporate quite faster. So capture everything really fast, as soon as you can. No matter how brilliant and obvious it is you'll forget it if you don't write it down. And then I try to get out 500 words a day. I wish I had some elegant other alternative things to tell you but it's just about that. |
| Adam: A lot of times there aren't these elaborate things because it comes back to actually doing the work whether how fancy we like to make or to tell ourselves otherwise it really is all about the discipline. You said there, "I am a writer." I'm a writer too and not only acknowledging that and believing that but realizing that I am very passionate about this work. I want to do this work. I need to do this work. Not only does it help me but it helps other people. Would you say realizing that writing makes you a better person but it makes other people better too have you been able to tie a passion to that and that's helped you show up time and time again or was it behind that do you think that helps you show up time and time again? |
| Glenn: Well certainly you do get a little feedback from people that writing does help other people and that's great. I mean I'd like to leave a legacy. Some things have taken me 25 years to figure out. You'd like to help other people have a shorter learning curve. The other thing I would say for me about writing is I have a very active messy mind and writing clarifies my thinking. Writing forces me to clarify my thinking and that makes me better in almost every aspect of the work I do, the relationships I have with family and friends. Clarifying my thinking is a key part of that and writing is the best tool I have for clarifying my thinking. |
| Adam: That's huge. Yeah. I love that. Writing will help you clarify your thinking. That's really good. And you've talked about your journey. We've now talked about the content creation part. Let's get to the heart of what I really wanted to talk to you about today which is leadership. It's what you write you about. It's what you focus you on. It's what you read about. I just think you're really knowledgeable in this area so we are all students of leadership. I, myself, want to become a better leader. The people listening want to become better leaders so this is going to be really valuable. So this first question, let's just get to it. What does leadership mean to you, Glen? |
| Glenn: I see leadership as the process of imagining something valuable that doesn't currently exist and then working with people to see that get created. Leadership for me is a craft. You just said it there. We're always working on it. A craft is a combination of learnable skills and some art that enables you to produce something beautiful and useful. That's a perfect definition, a way to think about leadership. It's a combination of learnable skills. Anybody can learn and can get better and there's some art because people are messy and there's a bit of mystery in the way we work with folks at times. So, imagination, learnable skills and the messy world of working with people. I like the quote I read recently from former general Colin Powell. He said that, "Leadership is the art of accomplishing more than the science of management thought possible." |
| Adam: So it's seeing a hole and creating something that the world needs from you, is kind of what your thoughts are on it? |
| Glenn: Yeah, absolutely. |
| Adam: No, that's really good. And so leads me to my next question. We think of leadership often as people with titles, a lot of tenure within a company. But this question, I feel, needs to be asked. What do you think about people who don't necessarily have a title? How can those people lead? |
| Glenn: Well, they're often the best leaders in any kind of organization or community. Title is a positional power thing, right? And that's important. But to me, leadership is about imagining a different kind of future state, whether it's a small process improvement in your manufacturing company, whether it's what to do with an empty lot in a community. It doesn't matter. Imagining that future state and then getting people aligned around that-- that's leadership. John Quincy Adams, probably one of our smartest presidents ever, said that, "If your actions inspire others to dream more and learn more and do more and become more, then you are a leader." That's a great way to think about it. It has nothing to do with your title. There is no question that it's a noble ambition to pursue titles that way because that positional authority can be really helpful in getting dreams accomplished. But people who say, "Well, I can't be a leader because I'’m not the boss," or whatever are probably missing the real opportunity that they have with their imagination and just finding a way to get it done. |
| Adam: That's one of my favorite quotes as well because he was so specific in what a leader is. Because the conversation about who is a leader is so broad sometimes. But I really like how he pinpointed those things. Talking about leadership too and leaders, what do you think is the most important thing that leaders should be focused on, or is there more than one? |
| Glenn: Well, there are a lot of things that pull at our attention when you're in leadership roles, whether formal or informal. I would say based on my experience in working with a lot of people who are trying to become better leaders, the number one thing we always have to be focused on is ignoring our inner whiner and complainer and doing what needs to be done when it needs to be done. Sometimes that means working more than is convenient. Sometimes that means actually getting the rest your body and mind need so you can be effective. Sometimes that means making a decision when you don't really want to, but leadership is about making decisions. We should talk more about that too. That's so important. But ignore that inner whiner and move on. That just seems to be an everyday aspect of leadership roles. |
| Adam: Well, talking about decisions, are there any tactics or skills that you feel that other leaders have developed or you have developed yourself-- become better at making quicker decisions? |
| Glenn: It's interesting you emphasize quicker. Maybe it's worth talking a bit about the word decide. I'm a weird guy. I like to thumb through dictionaries and look at word origins. But the word decide comes to English from the Latin root word -cidre, which means to cut off. Homicide is cutting off a human life. Suicide is killing yourself. Herbicide is killing plants, right? It’s -cide, -cide, -cide. So if you haven't cut something off, you probably haven't really made a decision. That's useful because we tend to think we've decided when maybe we sort of still have a mushy thing there. It's not really sliced off yet. Now in terms of making quicker decisions, the number one thing that I emphasize, that I try to cultivate, is pre-deciding. In fact, the very first article I ever wrote for your site, ASmithBlog.com, was about pre-deciding.. What I mean by that is thinking through what could happen. What are the scenarios? What might happen next, and then after that? Then based on what you imagine could happen, deciding, "Okay, if this is what happens, then we will do X. If this other thing happens, then it's most logical to do Y. That allows you to make certain kinds of decisions much quicker when the event actually happens. Being prepared, if you want to use the Boy Scout motto, is a big deal, and imagination is a pretty powerful way to make decisions faster. You still must be thoughtful about it. People around you may not see all that pre-work that you've done, but it really allows you to make decisions more quickly. |
| Adam: Would you say that the biggest thing influencing that is some sort of moral code or some code of values, or the want and need to do what is right? |
| Glenn: You have to have a framework to help you decide, what are the parameters that are going to be there? There are times when in the business world, for example, you have to pre-decide that no matter what, you're going to tell the truth or take the legal approach. There are times in a family life or community life where you pre-decide that "No matter what happens, I'm still going to speak gently and firmly, rather than escalate my voice." Or, "I'm going to continue to love these people, even though they drive me nuts." That's almost a pre-decision framework element that is important. I don't think it's limited to moral, but having those kind of frameworks and developing them over time is a really powerful way leaders operate more effectively as they take on more and more work, get more risky opportunities. Typically in an MBA program you learn a lot about evaluating and quantifying risk, including the risk of not doing something. That's another part of a framework that leaders often run into. |
| Adam: Talking about all these leadership ideas, inspiration is a huge one. Where does inspiration come from for you, Glenn? |
| Glenn: Being a biologist, I've always gotten a lot of inspiration from just being out in the natural world. I like to take walks. I like to walk with our dog. I also get inspiration from things like going through a different part of the bookstore than I usually do, and thumbing through books on the shelf, or looking at the different magazines. Just a few weeks ago I was looking at a magazine rack, and there was this architecture magazine. I thought, "Oh, I never looked at that kind of stuff," and I got an idea for how to solve an organizational problem that I was dealing with, from an architecture magazine. Never expected it, but it works. The other thing that I get inspiration from, I journal a lot, just scribbling stuff. I have these notebooks, and I'll just thumb back through old stuff from several years ago. It's amazing how it is a reminder of the faithfulness of people in my life, of God and others, to say, "My gosh, the things I was worried about then, they seem so trivial now." It inspires me somewhat to keep doing these things, and keep growing, keep learning, keep helping people. |
| Adam: Do you think the drive behind that is you just remaining curious about the world and how things work? Where do you think curiosity fits into the leadership spectrum? People becoming curious about how the world works. Going back to your definition of leadership, what leadership is, seeing the hole, and filling it with what the world needs, and you finding your solution by thumbing around, and that ideas probably come to you as you make your walks. How much of that is curiosity, and how important is curiosity for the rest of us? |
| Glenn: Curiosity is huge. It's tied with that imagination piece. It's pretty depressing to be around adults who are not curious. It's just odd at times. I love being around kids for that reason. They're fearless in their curiosity. Even though when you have a toddler asking, "Why? Why?", it gets really tough, but you got to retain that. It's been well said that in this world that we live in today where information is so readily available, the real skill is going to be not, being able to find information, but the ability to ask better questions. It's actually a discipline that we need to help ourselves with. I have a friend who-- in fact, we just talked about this last week-- when I got together with him, he said, "Look, I want you to ask me every time we get together, 'What are some of the good questions you've been asking lately?'" I thought, "Boy, that's just brilliant. That guy is so smart, to get accountability on asking questions." That curiosity piece is huge. These are amazing times we live in, and there's a large part of television, and a lot of news stuff which is horrible-- it's like a wet blanket smothering your curiosity. It is. It feeds all the wrong stuff, rather than our curiosity. Part of what I will do in the natural world is, I'll just sit down somewhere in the natural setting, and I'll start saying, "Hmm, how many things can I spot in this little two-square-foot of field that I'm sitting on?" Or I spend some time sitting next to a creek near our house, and it occurred to me looking at it, that not all the water moves at the same speed. Why is that? Then I started researching a little bit more about hydrology, and I found out a really amazing fact, that at any point in time, in a river or a stream, 20% of the water is actually going upstream. |
| Adam: Yeah, that post is coming out this week, isn't it? |
| Glenn: Yes, I wrote an article about that. Just the ability to force yourself to sit there and stare at it, and make yourself ask the questions and think. That's an important skill we have to develop, because one of the most dangerous things is if any of us, no matter how experienced or smart, get into a tendency to say, "I know everything important to know," we're in deep trouble, right? |
| Adam: Absolutely. You’re talking about asking the right questions, asking better questions. I know you've written a piece for the site before, too, about that very thing. For the listeners, if you can recall any of those things you wrote in the article, or maybe some new things that come to you as of late, but what are some things that we can do to begin asking better questions, begin asking the right question? |
| Glenn: One thing that I've been experimenting a bit more in the last few months for myself is, because of the nature of this company-- we're going through a lot of change-- I'm asking, "If I go forward two years and I look back to now, what things do I wish that I had been working on now, or what things are most likely to be really important two years from now, as opposed to something that's trivial? How would I know?” Just forcing yourself to go to a different point in time and space, enables me to ask some better questions than I ask when I'm in the thick of all this stuff in the incoming artillery barrage of my inbox and all that. Force yourself to think about, a couple years from now, what's going to be going on? That's impacting. |
| Adam: That's really good. Talking about just your thought process through that, and hearing about your journey, coming from the scientist route to where you're at now, and writing about leadership, it was a different journey than other leaders. A question that I like to ask leaders, and research, as well-- I've been researching lately, more biographies, autobiographies, and actually looking at the lives of who I would deem successful people, and seeing what has made them different from other leaders. Is there anything that you can point to in your life, that you would say you do differently than other leaders, whether it be a daily routine, maybe a thought process, as you look at other leaders, as well, that you would say, "Maybe this is different about me, that makes my work different from everybody else's, or makes me a better person." |
| Glenn: That's an interesting question. One thing that my wife thinks is really weird that I do is talk a lot in the shower. I practice conversations. I try out different ways of saying things. I'm pretty good at writing, but I have to do a lot of verbal conversation, a lot of verbal presentation. I use my shower time to do that a lot. I'll do that if I'm by myself in car too. Just try three or four different ways to say something that's really important that I'm trying to get across. I don't know if other people do that or not but I've done that since I was little and I've kept it up. I remember on our honeymoon my wife was saying, "Who are you talking to in there?" "I'm talking to myself, dear." If other people find it helpful they should do it too, the shower is a great for that. |
| Adam: No, that’s really good and it goes back to what you were saying earlier that being prepared for decisions you're going to make, you alluded to there, you're preparing for conversations you're going to make or presentations you're going to make it sounds like that's just your constantly preparing for what's next. Whether it be you know it's coming or a possible thing that could happen. It just sounds like you're constantly preparing which is huge. |
| Glenn: And some people might call it obsessive, I don't know if I'm just wired that way but yeah, I guess I am obsessive. I'm really always thinking about the future and how do we make this all work better, how can I get that idea across, how can I make that presentation half as long and three times as good? Just constantly trying to sharpen it that way. |
| Adam: And that's great too and it goes back to even the platform that you have built, leadership craft, going back to what you said at the beginning, it is a craft and we should be sharpening it, we should be becoming better at our craft constantly. A lot of leadership, leading with our lives, leading at work is very intentional work and going from this to talking about being intentional with not only ourselves but the people we have around us. You've told us you worked for a company, a lot of changes going on. I think an important question for us as leaders to be thinking about how do we ensure that we have the right people around us and how do you ensure that you have the right people around you? |
| Glenn: That's really about knowing your strengths, knowing what you're best at, knowing where you are really not good and finding complementary skillset people to be around you. By an IQ test measure I'm a really, really smart guy, that's why I believe God gave me a wife and children to point out when I'm a complete moron. So one of the most important things is to be around people who are not impressed with you because they sharpened you, they keep you grounded in good ways. In addition to people of complementary strengths and capabilities that you have, having time and space to be around people who were not impressed with you is really a guard against a lot of bad things that could happen to leaders. It really helps deflate your head quite a bit. And then over the last few years doing a lot more globally with people from India, China, Malaysia, throughout Europe, throughout Latin America one of the things that I'm getting a little better at is mechanically figuring out how you hold together groups of people who have very diverse backgrounds who think very differently. They have different frameworks, they have different cultural references. I can remember one of my first trips to India we had a project where we knew where we wanted to go but we didn't know how to get there and I said, "Well, we're going to Lewis and Clark our way there. Of course, they have no idea who Lewis and Clark are, but they have other kinds of journey stories in their culture that you can tap into and that sort of diversity could be really powerful, it's amazing how you can do it. The key there is not just to have diversity for diversity sake but to create an environment where there is inclusion, where everybody can bring their ideas and nobody gets laughed that, where you have healthy laughter in a group but everybody is generating ideas and is respected and wants to be heard. And diversity is not worth very much unless there's that corresponding kind of inclusion. But I am really learning a lot about how common people are. I mean, the things that we care about are very common all over the world. People are much the same even though there is a lot of diversity. When you could tap into that, you could really put together some memorable teams that really produce-- they're like the Colin Powell quote, "Accomplish much, much more than anybody thought was possible." |
| Adam: I really like that point because a lot of the leaders that I talked to are just well-known in the states here, and getting me thinking about maybe expanding my guests more in a global sense because the great thing about technology is it has brought us all closer in ways. So it is easier to do interviews with anyone in the world. So thank you, Glenn. But talking about thoughts, talking about strengths, would you say that you have learned more from your mistakes or your triumphs? |
| Glenn: Is this a trick question [laughter]? I have plenty of both, I'm happy to say. The mistakes sting more, and they leave lessons which I'm much less likely to forget. I don't think I'm the only one who cringes when they remember mistakes and think, "Oh, boy. I did not handle that one well." I very much learned through the mistake pieces. And, hopefully, you don't make the same mistake twice. My grandfather used to tell me when I was a boy, "Glenn, you're going to shoot yourself in the foot every once in a while. The trick is not to reload and fire again." I'm really hoping that through my writing, the coaching work, both personal and kind of indirect coaching I do, other people will learn from my mistakes and not make the same ones. Part of the challenge with people is that every generation has to learn the same lessons. But we can institutionalize some learning, we can help that learning happen a lot faster and avoid certain kinds of mistakes. I definitely learned a lot more from my mistakes. |
| Adam: Kind of leading in off that question, but how often would you say you spend looking at the past? Is that a common practice for you to make sure that your future is better? Or is that an intentional piece of how you look at your life? Or is it just as it comes to you and you go with then? Or is it a common practice, weekly, monthly, yearly? What does that look like? |
| Glenn: Every month I schedule a little bit of time on the weekend, just to go back through some old journals and review them. I have no specific objective about, "Let's look at mistakes." But just looking at some old stuff, it's amazing how some things that didn't make sense then make sense now, or some idea I had at the time, now it's more applicable. You're making me think that maybe I should build in a practice in my life, a particular rhythm and discipline about reviewing mistakes. I tend to live within a little too much in the immediacy. You really blow it the way you talked about-- like yesterday, I made what I thought was a lighthearted, humorous comment in a group, and there was a person in the group who did not take it as funny at all [laughter]. Shoot. All right, all right. I wish I could take that back. And you say, "Well, okay. What should I have done differently?" Well, in this case, the babbling Brooke should have kept his mouth shut and not said anything. That would have been the right thing [laughter]. Babbling brook is and old joke in my family, obviously. But you're making me think about the-- in a number of religious traditions, there is the practice of Examen, where there is a systematic time that you go back, and you think about what's going on, good, bad, and otherwise, and deal with it. Maybe I should resurrect something like that in my disciplined time. That would be a good thing to add. But I do think that we also have to not dwell on mistakes too long; learn from them and let’s go on. Life is too short to just be stuck in the past. |
| Adam: Yeah. I mean, that's the other part too is that, many times, people internalize mistakes too long but I've found it a helpful exercise to look back on my own mistakes, so I can become better from them. If you don't internalize them and beat yourself up about them, and move on, that's great. It's when you hold on too long, and they get you down and depressed, that's not the right way to look at it, either. It is a balance to it, for sure. |
| Glenn: You can't let something that happened in the past, that you recognize is a mistake, become your identity. That's not who you want to be, or who you really are, so learn from it and move on. I'm with you there. |
| Adam: In the same section of discussion here, I'd like to ask you, one, what's the most important leadership you've ever learned, and then what's the best advice you've ever received? |
| Glenn: Probably the most important leadership that I've ever learned, and I have to learn frequently again and again, is that all leadership begins with self-leadership. The only person you can control is yourself. There is no leadership if you can't get past self-leadership. A big part of our craft is, we're always working on our self-leadership. We're always pushing to learn more, develop our skills, learn how to ignore our inner whiner and complainer, that kind of thing. In terms of the best advice I ever received in the business world, shortly after I came to this company that I work for, my manager told me, really in an off-handed way, he said, "Look, here's the thing. Figure out how to do your job in 30 hours a week, and then use the 10 to 15 hours a week that you have, to learn new things, expand your network, meet people, work on outside projects.” That will force you to do your work really well, your normal work, get it down to 30 hours, and it always keeps you fresh and engaged, and capable of stretching into the next assignment. That was brilliant advice. I tease this guy who gave it to me-- he's really a good mentor-- that it's a million-dollar piece of advice. It's probably been worth a million dollars to me over my career. |
| Adam: I can speak to that same sort of thing. My best job that I ever had working for someone, was a boss that-- sort of the same thing-- really pushed me developing myself. Not only talking about the networking, but he worked it in to my job, where I was developing myself. On the clock, he was willing to pay me for reading, for watching different videos, and I really respect that, because it not only made me a better employee and be able to appreciate it and that he cared about me, but it made me a better person, not only working for him. When employers can grab hold of that idea and show that you care about your employees in huge ways like that, and show that you care about the leader that they are, the person they are, appreciation goes a long way, too. Not only was it helping me as a person, but I felt appreciated, and I wanted to produce better work for him and the company. It just works in so many ways. |
| Glenn: Right. Totally agree. |
| Adam: Wrapping up here, if you could pinpoint anything, either from this conversation, or maybe something we haven't talked about yet, what are the few key factors, or maybe there's many, that have contributed to your success? |
| Glenn: Curiosity has been a piece of it, for sure. My parents had a World Book Encyclopedia in the house, and that was what I looked at every day when I was eating my cornflakes for breakfast. My mother jokes that she could always tell which volume I was in, because everything that day started with the letter M, or whatever. That kind of curiosity across disciplines has really been a big factor. The willingness to write things down, write out ideas, and share them, has been a big factor, because it helped clarify my thinking, but also, sharing meant that I was getting feedback, or I could have some influence in things. I have a number of contacts who are outstanding thinkers, but they're maybe not sharing as much as they might. It's limited their ability to be as successful as they could be. I spend a lot of time encouraging them to share these brilliant ideas they have. Those are two things in particular, I would say. |
| Adam: All right. My last question for you is, where would you like to send people to find out more about you and your work? |
| Glenn: My personal site is not available right now, so probably the best thing I can do would be to say, read the things I've put on ASmithBlog.com. There's a lot of content there. Or you can search for my name, Glenn Brooke, on Amazon. I've got some books there on a variety of topics, some of them I would hope interest you. |
| Adam: All right, Glenn. Thanks again for coming on the show. I really enjoyed the conversation, and I think the listeners will take a lot away. |
| Glenn: Likewise. Thanks a lot. |
| Adam: Thank you for tuning in. I hope you got something out of these ideas. Go ahead and subscribe, so you don't miss an episode. |