

00:00:00:00 - 00:00:09:18

Zein

You have to recognize this. There's many different ways of exercising leadership. Probably the single most important thing is, to find a model that keeps you authentic.

00:00:09:20 - 00:00:11:08

Reeta

Yeah.

00:00:11:10 - 00:00:36:11

Zein

You get caught out very quickly, when you're trying to adopt a leadership model that is just not you. Behavioral patterns that are just not you.

00:00:36:13 - 00:01:11:02

Reeta

Hello, and welcome to Transcending Boundaries. I'm Reeta Roy. Today, I'm speaking with someone whose journey stretches from the heart of the Sudan to the helm of global leadership. A man who not only led one of the world's largest iconic corporations, but who now helps steer one of the largest, most impactful philanthropic organizations in the world. He began his career as an engineer, trained to understand complex systems, and that mindset has guided him ever since.

00:01:11:04 - 00:01:47:20

Reeta

Seeing the whole picture, connecting the parts and leading with strategic clarity while prioritizing values. As president of PepsiCo, he led operations across more than 80 countries. With a deep respect for people, cultures and diversity. Today, he chairs the board of the Mastercard Foundation, where he helps shape a future driven by equity with dignified opportunities for young people, particularly in Africa and in indigenous communities in Canada.

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Reeta

And yet, with all his influence, what stands out most is his quiet wisdom, his clarity of thought, and his belief that leadership, at its best, is an act of service. It is a true privilege to welcome someone who embodies purpose in action a systems thinker, a humble changemaker, a global leader. My guest is Zein Abdullah. Welcome. Thank you so much for making time for Transcending Boundaries.

00:02:21:02 - 00:02:41:04

Reeta

Pleasure. Oh, fantastic. Fantastic. So we're going to walk through your life in a way. And I think the best place to start is right at the beginning. But your childhood, if you would talk a little bit about growing up in Sudan, your parents and the influence they had on you.

00:02:41:06 - 00:02:42:17

Zein

Okay, well, that's a,

00:02:42:19 - 00:02:44:10

Reeta

Wide open field, a wide.

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Zein

Open field and a story in its own right. Well, I sometimes think I'm the luckiest man on the planet. I had the most diverse and, just incredibly exciting childhood. I grew up in the Sudan. My father Sudanese, my mother's English. And so I grew up really, between two cultures. We spoke Arabic at home, inside the house.

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Zein

Sorry, English at home for my mother and Arabic, outside the house as we mixed and played with school friends. But, you know, the, the other exciting thing about it is, my father, whose roots, because of his father, had always been interested in farming and so as soon as he had the means, he bought a plot of land on the on the Blue Nile.

00:03:30:23 - 00:03:51:23

Zein

And so most days we would travel out of the city, go to the farm, and spend the day with, with farmers, playing these big adventures in the fields, learning to milk cows, learning how to milk a sheep. And then, you know, when the community tea time would come, we'd all sit around, and one of us would get sent to milk a sheep.

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Zein

So that be the milk to make the to make this very rich, rich tea. And then at the end of the day, go back to the city. And so you grow up with these really two different perspectives of, of life. What rural life was, was like a window to rural life in Sudan. And then, of course, the hustle and bustle, of the city.

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Zein

But we also grew up, if we got the time, we could probably afford every other year to return to the UK for to visit my mother's family, traveling to the north of England and, and meeting her relatives. And, you know, even at that time, two Sudanese little kids because myself and my older brother running around this, small town in the north of England was quite, was quite a novelty.

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Zein

So we sort of got used to, standing out and there's good and bad to that. But learning again, you know, how, how different the world is, you know, the cold, the wet and the gray, the hot, but also, the paved roads and the dust roads. And so growing up very early on, knowing that this is a big, complex world with so much difference.

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Reeta

Yes. So there were already sounds adventurous. And I know both of your parents had a huge influence about on you. Talk a little bit more about your dad because you said he grew up in a farming community, as a kid. Yeah. And then he went off to university, in Sudan and then in the UK.

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Reeta

Talk a little bit about what he was like and his influence on you.

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Zein

Again, a remarkable journey, because he grew up in the, in the north of Sudan and the farming community, in a small town called Dongola, which is in Nubia, in the north of Sudan. And his father, who'd only received a fairly basic education, was a date farmer. He dates reared camels, and also grew fava beans, which were sort of like the two staples of, Sudanese diet.

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Zein

Very large family, lots of brothers and sisters. But he was the first to be, to be educated. And that was that was not easy because the nearest school was across a big stream. And he said he used to have to ride the donkey and cross the stream to get to school every day.

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Zein

But he was educated, got a scholarship to go to First University in Khartoum. And then, won a scholarship to go and be educated, in the UK, where he studied geology and went on to do a PhD, and become a geophysicist. Returned to Sudan as the first director general of the, a Sudanese director general of the Geological Survey, because up until that point been a position, by British appointees.

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Zein

So, you know, a lot of these parts of the story unfolded later in life. We'd never realized fully the journey because he's a very private, quiet man, very humble. And, and we'd not really fully internalized many of the, chapters of his journey. And what did it take? And it was actually my wife, Debbie, who got on down to the fact that, you know, there's an awful lot more here to hear about, and she, persuaded him to do a series of recordings a bit like this.

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Reeta

Wow, wow.

00:07:06:12 - 00:07:23:14

Zein

About your life. And we ended up listening to them saying, My God, I didn't know that. I didn't know he actually had the highest score in the Sudan School Certificate for decades. There was so many aspects to his life that were like, just unfolding, very late on. Yeah, very late on. I must dig those tapes out, actually.

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Reeta

That's fantastic. You absolutely must, because that what amazing part of family history. But clearly he was an adventurer as well, in his own right, and courageous to leave home, to go on to another country altogether. And he met your mom. How did that happen?

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Zein

That's a that's an interesting story in it's own right. There's my father studying in London, doing his PhD. And, he went to the north of England to do research in limestone caves. My mother is a schoolteacher. And she happened to be in the in the same location running a puppet show.

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Reeta

Oh, great for children. Perfect for a teacher and for kids.

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Zein

For kids. And, he stopped by, watched a bit of the show, and as they say, the rest is history. But it's quite remarkable, you know, and we stop and think about it is my mother hadn't been outside the UK, you know, so she'd grown up, you know, lovely family, wonderful life, but really centered around a pretty small, pretty small community.

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Zein

And there she is. She meets this man from Sudan. She probably knew almost nothing about Sudan, falls in love and is prepared to travel thousands of miles. And at that time, it really was planes, trains, boats, automobiles to get there. With no real idea of exactly what she was going to. But yeah, you know, again, a woman with incredible, courage and the spirit of adventure and, boy, myself and my brothers, picture ourselves every time saying, thank goodness she had us.

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Reeta

Yes, yes, but clearly it's evident in your life to which we'll come to. And, one of the things that which I found remarkable was that you and your brother, spent your early years traveling everywhere with your mum and dad because he was mapping out Sudan's resources. So you were in tents in different places. Speak about that adventure.

00:09:21:15 - 00:09:42:10

Zein

It kind of a really remarkable wilderness. And in many ways, the obvious is a tribute to him and the role he wanted to play in mapping out Sudan. But the incredible thing is her preparedness to say, okay, so I've just come over from the UK, I thought I was going to get a house and, so it's going to be a tent, okay.

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Zein

And it's going to be in the back of a truck for most of the time. And, the kids schooling is a question mark. And instead of sort of saying, well, you know, Mahmood, there's a line in the sand that I'm crossing, she leaned in and said, okay, I think we can make this, I think we can make this work.

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Zein

And so we, we set off. Well, I can say we I wouldn't have known at the time. Yeah. So they set off and, and, you know, she homeschooled us for those couple of years. But we got to, you know, see the Kababish in the northeast of Sudan, and we got to see, these massive, massive herds of camels, and all the diversity and richness of the country.

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Zein

Now, I remember it through pictures, of course. Yeah. You know, so you don't remember much before you are five, but it's really interesting as you look at those pictures and you're in it, you start to feel it.

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Reeta

Yeah.

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Zein

And so yeah, incredibly thankful to the pair of them that, we were prepared or they were prepared to take that adventure and have us go on those adventures from the get go.

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Reeta

Absolutely. And that's what an amazing classroom and I think about it was just the world. Yeah, yeah. And culture and learning about people and just probably playing with all kinds of kids as you were running around. Yeah. And now you talked about the farm near the Blue Nile, and that you'd go visit. But there was a period of time where they left you both there, you and your brother there.

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Reeta

And you were responsible. Responsible? Sort of. Yeah. Tell us about that. Don't do too badly. Okay?

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Zein

It was sort of like one of those, lessons in, early lessons in life where, when, the first few times they left, as there was sort of was a budget and and somebody to sort of take care of us. And then as we got into our early teens, my father decided that they could leave us and leave us with the cash flow of the farm as, as our income stream and the thing to manage.

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Zein

And, and it really was a pretty early lesson. And, you know, okay, we can sell the eggs and we can get good cash for that, but then we've got to we've got to buy this, and we've got to pay that. And it was a fantastic experience, but also one in which you understand the balance between freedom.

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Zein

So it was just fantastic. Well, because the cash flow, was pretty good compared to our expectations, but also responsibility. And the fact that, you know, when my father came back, we'd have to account for everything. We'd have to show that the farm had moved forward, and that, you know, the what the farmers needed for the new crops and for the new batch of chicks was all in order.

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Zein

So, yeah, fantastic experience. And we thought we'd done the deal of the century. Well, so they were.

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Reeta

I.

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Zein

We really thought we'd nailed it when, this one donkey that, you know, we would sort of been trying to teach to jump. Donkeys don't jump. But we persevered, and we've actually got this donkey to jump, and we managed to get a deal, with, one of the neighboring farmers to swap our bicycles for this donkey.

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Zein

We thought, well, you know, we're trading two of our bikes for a jumping donkey

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Reeta

Jumping donkey. Jumping donkey.

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Zein

And, so when my father came back, apart from sort of presenting the accounts, we very proudly presented this donkey, you know, we own and called him Dash.

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Reeta

Dash.

00:13:07:19 - 00:13:21:04

Zein

We owned Dash, and he looked at it and said, what? What is this? What have you done? And I said, well, we only used two bikes. And he was like, do you know how much those bikes cost?

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Zein

How much we had to save up to get those bikes? And he said, this donkey is worthless. And it's because apparently that because the donkey trotted. The only value of a donkey really is can it deliver the milk?

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Reeta

Exactly.

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Zein

I said, you know, this donkey will just curdle all the milk. You can't deliver milk with this donkey.

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Reeta

I'm sure Dash was very sweet.

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Zein

He was. He was lovely and carried on. We tried harder and harder. But you can't teach a donkey to jump. Yeah, yeah, donkeys don't joke.

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Reeta

An early lesson. Early lesson? I'm sure it served you well as you went on to your business career. And then you left. You left, Sudan to pursue your education in the UK. You were trained as an engineer. And that, again, crossing of cultures. Perhaps it wasn't as hard because it visited your mum's family, a few times.

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Reeta

But speak about that part of your life.

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Zein

Well, we at the time there was, there was sort of two choices. We'd both got good enough grades in the Sudan school Certificate to, continue Khartoum University. But there was a lot of political trouble, and the university was opening and shutting, opening and shutting. And, we decided we'd go, to the UK. And he was always quite keen that we sort of follow in his footsteps, and go to Imperial College, a great, wonderful science and engineering, university.

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Zein

And so, you know, we had to because we both graduated quite young from, from school, myself and my older brother the year before me. And so we did a year sort of conversion where we did A-levels at a school up in the again in the Midlands of the UK. And that was a time when I guess we got the better access to, to my mother's family and their support. And then London and, that was quite, quite a culture shock, you know, because, London was a big city, you know, I mean, khartoum's a decent city, but it was nothing like, like that

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Zein

transfer or transition to London, and then immersing yourself in a science and engineering degree, was again, an interesting set of challenges. And the thing that carried us through is it was still very diverse. There was a student body from all over the world. So, you know, we had, great Iranian friends, Lebanese, Syrian, Iraqi, you know, quite a few, friends from Central Europe.

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Zein

So, a wonderfully diverse, diverse network of friends, but quite different again, in that, you know, in your childhood, you established deep friends that, you know, are going to be there for life. This was more transient. And, one of the things I absolutely learned is we tend to confuse the word you know, acquaintance with friend.

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Zein

And you realize that you have a very wide number of people, you know, and sometimes we call friends, but they're on a, they're part of our, they're part of our acquaintance group. And then there's those handful of people who are who are true friends. And they're people I stayed very connected to, and, still what I would call my friends today.

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Zein

Yeah. They're largely from Sudan.

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Reeta

Yes. That's remarkable. And in that time, as you know, I think a young man, going through an intense, intense course of study, new country, So many things, percolating your mind, and then you start to think about your career and when and where life is leading you next. Were they people who influenced you, those friends, perhaps those friends.

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Reeta

Perhaps a professor. What? What opened doors for you?

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Zein

You know, The first thing I say is my father was incredibly open minded. He left it to us. There was pretty clear he had a picture in his mind. And the picture in his mind is the pretty typical story. You get an engineering degree, you come back to Sudan and you open your engineering, consultancy workshop, whatever it is.

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Zein

But that is sort of the, the plan. It was, I think, keen for us to be private sector having him based on his experiences. But he was very light touch. Very light touch. And he always just fed in sort of almost questions rather than providing any sense of answers. So here's the things you might think about.

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Zein

My mother was exactly the same. She was, my father was quite private and quiet. My mother was pretty outspoken, and so you could see what she wanted to be. She struggled more with it. She was a little bit more. Well, you know, I think, but both of them were very, very centered on making sure that we, we considered lots of things, but that we made choices.

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Zein

I was remembering saying, you know, just remember, you know, you will make the choice, but you will live with it, okay? And so it has to be it has to be your choice. And, and I did the classic, you know, pros

and cons and, and decided, well, I'll punt the idea of going back to Sudan because what I really need and what university degrees and all the education in the world doesn't give you is real life.

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Zein

You've got to find that thing that converts all of you what you've learned into experiences that then make you a really good engineer or a really good manager or whatever else it is. Pure education doesn't do that. And at that time I felt, well, look, an established company or enterprise in the UK is going to give me better learning and development than just starting my own business as an engineer.

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Zein

I could make it work because of what I really learned or I could learn. And so, looked at a series of the classic management trainee companies, in the, in the UK and, and obviously a science and engineering degree steers you the very traditional way. You know, you should look at the oil industry.

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Zein

You should look at, you know, the space and engineering industry. And yet I came across this, this brochure for Mars incorporated. And the thing that that struck me about it was, essentially not in their words, but what we're going to teach you to be a really good manager and a really good human being is what sort of what they were offering.

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Zein

And, it was all about this grounding in diverse experiences. It's about moving between different functions. It was about trying to understand what makes up a whole enterprise. And of course, the risk was it didn't sound like it was describing an awful lot of I was going to make you a great engineer. But it was still very appealing.

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Zein

And so I joined Mars with the idea of, okay, a couple of years experience there and then go back. Go back to Sudan. The trouble is, life takes over.

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Reeta

Life takes over.

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Zein

And, I ended up getting just so many different opportunities at Mars. I mean, in my time at that company, I worked in nearly every function, never in research and development, which is a good thing. But, I mean, I, I started in engineering, I worked in manufacturing, I worked in sales and human resources and marketing and ended up as a general manager.

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Zein

And, it went like that. Of course, the other thing that happened, this is I met my wife. Yes.

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Reeta

You started the first week as interns in different places.

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Zein

We both started as these management, graduate trainees, her in production and me in engineering and, yeah. And then grew up together.

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Reeta

And grew up together. What a wonderful thing. I can already see the thread from that childhood traveling all over Sudan. This great exploration of life and the world come together and all the diversity in

it, and it seems like you just embraced all of it. All of it. And that's really come to characterize your love for many things and also how you travel across multiple boundaries, which is amazing, really amazing.

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Reeta

You know, when you think about all these experience starting to shape your leadership, even before you recognize and realize it's shaping your leadership, are there a couple standout stories or examples, or encounters or even conversations with people, whether it's your mom or people in the workplace that really started to help me. When you look back, define your own style of leadership, your own approach.

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Zein

Yeah. I'll probably highlight a couple of things. You know, there's many Reeta, but maybe highlighting and this is looking across a period of time. Yeah. Two things. One was the start, you know, did this training program at Mars and then if you're if you have potential, they really do throw you in at the deep end.

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Zein

And I was I thought I was going to be a technical engineer and do controlled programing and, and they said, well, you should probably learn how to manage people. That's okay. So a year and a half in. i'd have been about 22. They threw me into line manage the technical workforce. So there i was this young Sudanese now

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Zein

With all of these well-established British technicians, engineers, electricians and I had to line manage them and that really was quite the task because you could see them all looking. He's not really even from England. I mean, this guy's from Sudan. So what is what is he though? And that was one question. The other question is he's 22 years old.

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Zein

What can you possibly know? And of course, the answer is I don't know as much as you.

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Reeta

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Zein

And you learn one of the first elements is you don't know more than the people that work for you. And therefore you work with them and therefore a lot of your role is actually in service of that. And it's how do you facilitate and create an environment in which they produce, and, and so that was, really and that shaped my thinking on what leadership is as it's moved from management to leadership.

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Zein

Enormously, enormously. The second thing I would say is that as your career progresses and you get opportunity to work in many different areas and in many different locations, you see differences. There's no doubt, but you see more similarity. And you realize that an awful lot of what goes wrong in business is we focus on the difference rather than really understand that more is the same.

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Zein

Than it is different. You know, human values are pretty similar. It doesn't matter what you talk about China or America or anywhere else, you know, a young person entering the workforce his aspirations, and goals and desires are the same. Doesn't matter if we're talking, Russia or Europe or Western Europe, and yet we're always built to think that's so. Now, there are differences.

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Zein

Of course. There's differences in culture, there's differences in belief, some of the belief systems. But that typically influences execution. You've got to be aware of them so that you can, you know, meet the right hurdles on respect and tolerance and all of those things. But they shouldn't dictate perspective. And again, it's been, just an incredible learning for me.

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Zein

And even down to when I used to look at a traditional cultural training, nearly all of the cultural training was about the differences. Anything. Well, why don't we really spend an awful lot of time talking about what's the same, what God intended on, on what do we share? And that, and I, you know, there's many things we could talk about on leadership, but those two things really,

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Zein

You know, I think as I've, I've grown and developed, have influenced me enormously.

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Reeta

You know, that's that's a very powerful lesson, particularly today in the world. You know, so many people have this view of business or large companies, big corporations have a they carry a mental model about what leadership is like in these large organizations. That's about power and drive and bottom line, which obviously is extremely simplistic view. And there are many probably legion of examples of forms of leadership.

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Reeta

But these are very different worlds. To travel in, in large organizations which are in a way countries unto themselves, countries unto themselves. And, you know, given your early experiences of learning to recognize that the people who lead you, are the ones who actually work with you in so many ways and, and yet navigating that in large companies, as you have.

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Reeta

And today, even in boardrooms, how do you make that balance and, and stay who you are and still influence.

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Zein

You know, I mean, for a start, you have to recognize this. There's many different ways of exercising leadership. Probably the single most important thing is to find the model that keeps you authentic.

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Reeta

Yes.

00:27:15:09 - 00:27:35:16

Zein

You get caught out very quickly when you are, when you're trying to adopt a leadership model that is just not you, behavioral patterns that are just not you. You know, in many ways, one of the flaws that companies make is that they, they identify what they call development needs. And then they say, we're going to train you on that.

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Zein

And, well, if it's a technical skill, yes. What if it's behavioral and part of your makeup, you're unlikely to change it. And what should be far better off doing is getting a return on putting emphasis into helping people leverage their strengths. And so pretty early on, I've come to know an awful lot about who I am and who I'm not.

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Zein

And, you know, I've had feedback in a time that says, what do you need to be louder, more assertive? And it's like, what am I'm not going to be those things. I'm unlikely to be good at those things. I'm pretty good at listening, facilitating, trying to find common understanding, alignment. Those are my strengths. And, so I pretty early on decided whatever the consequence, I'd play to my strengths and not worry too much and, certainly be aware, not be complacent with but not try and become and, it's interesting, you know, because it's not a natural fit, for most companies, most companies want to know that

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Zein

you're going to overcome those things and say, well.

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Reeta

Sort of not.

00:28:51:10 - 00:28:55:22

Zein

The lovely thing about maturing and developing is you actually become more comfortable with who you are.

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Reeta

Yes.

00:28:56:16 - 00:29:17:24

Zein

And more confident in saying, you know what? I'm just never going to be that. But I, I still see too many times now and when I'm mentoring a coaching young people getting so hung up about, you know, I need to be as well. You sort of dumb because look at this, look at this basket of skills and, and attributes you have that are just wonderful.

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Zein

And we can take those and really grow you I mean, really grow you as opposed to spending an awful lot of time making you unhappy.

00:29:26:18 - 00:29:27:09

Reeta

At something you're not.

00:29:27:09 - 00:29:59:04

Zein

And all of those things that just add up, don't add up. The other thing that I, I've touched on it is, you know, this notion that. Leadership really is a service. It's not for you. You provide leadership for the people around you, not for yourself. And I think when leaders come off the rails, that's probably the single biggest key revolt is to believe it.

00:29:59:04 - 00:30:20:16

Zein

It's about you. It's not. And, because you can never, never achieve a big goal as yourself. And, you know, you ask that question to anybody that agree and yet you, you release them and ego and all these other things come out and, you know, and I and it's like, no, you it it's the group that are going to deliver this.

00:30:20:18 - 00:30:43:13

Zein

And actually it may be you can be influenced by people you can't see that aren't even in the room, maybe the people that are going to derail or carry this to success. And so this notion that leadership has to be service to a direct and indirect community of people that are going to get a big task done, I think is misunderstood a lot of the time.

00:30:43:15 - 00:30:56:00

Zein

And, you know, when I look at polarization, even in even in the world today, we see it's because leaders become self-centered rather than in service of the communities that they're responsible for.

00:30:56:02 - 00:31:39:12

Reeta

Exactly. That's powerful. You've had to live, may, not have to, but and also chose to live in many parts of the world throughout your career. So again, once again, that adventure of experiencing such diversity, the richness of what the world has to offer in terms of culture, people and traditions. Are there places in the world which you think are kind of emblematic of what, what when you think about the world and bringing up your kids to learn to love and embrace, you know, the goodness in this world and the richness in this world, are there places which have left a mark on you and shaped you and you're thinking.

00:31:39:14 - 00:32:05:02

Zein

Yeah, you know, we've, as a family, we've traveled and lived in many, many different countries. And, you know, Reeta, there's been highlights in every single one. You know, Debbie and I have always sort of looked back and said, you know, we've not had a bad assignment anywhere. Because everywhere there's been something that is being rich in terms of perspective, growth, challenge and stretch for the children.

00:32:05:04 - 00:32:28:00

Zein

You know, Yasmin and Layla, as they've grown up, they've had to make these changes and, and they've learned change as a result. So just the very fact of moving has been, has been a blessing in its own, right. But, you know, we we're very lucky in that the very young years when they were born and those for so the first seven years of their life was in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates.

00:32:28:02 - 00:33:05:11

Zein

And, it's actually you know, not by design, you know, that's just where career took us in the first instance. But when I look back on it, it was like a melting pot of the world. They met people from all over the world, East and west. And I think that was just fabulous. And then we were really lucky in that several other places, you know, we went to Brussels, we went to Geneva, and in each of those places, because of either the corporate world or the United Nations in Geneva is fantastic because a little bit like Noah's Ark, there was two from everywhere, you know, and, and so they grew

00:33:05:11 - 00:33:43:12

Zein

up playing and learning and challenging and debating with kids from all over. Now the downside is it's given them this notion that they live in the world, which is great, but they're restless and they never want to stay in one, in one place. But, but it was just a fabulous, fabulous, fabulous opportunity. And, and it influenced me a lot later on when I was, you know, looking at, whenever we come to relocate people in a big corporation, we tend to ask all the career questions and, you know, and then we try and get them to sell it to their family as this is a good thing to do and

00:33:43:12 - 00:34:06:03

Zein

move. And I suddenly feel, you know, this should be a compelling decision for the family because of all those reasons. Yes, yes. The proposition is not you're going to go and do this engineering job in XYZ. The proposition is your family are going to grow and learn and develop and, and that's, that's good value.

00:34:06:03 - 00:34:21:00

Zein

That's so beyond what we can give you just within the four walls of our organization. And so we started to do that, we started to always look at, you know, the lens for moving people around in a much broader context. And not just their career.

00:34:21:02 - 00:34:50:20

Reeta

You know, I'm so glad you brought up your kids and, and family. This incredible growth that you've had personally and professionally, and obviously play multiple roles, you are dad, you are a husband, you are a leader. How did you find I don't know if balance is that right word. But that flow of enabling the family, being with them and enjoying them at the same time, enabling your career and learning and growing at the same time.

00:34:50:22 - 00:34:57:16

Reeta

What was that flow like? It's something so many young people struggle with, I know.

00:34:57:18 - 00:35:16:08

Zein

And rightly so. The fact that you struggle with it is actually a good thing because, you know, thinking about it and trying to work it out and get the right balance and it's difficult, it's almost impossible to get the perfect balance. And you will always look back and think, did I and did I miss less than this?

00:35:16:08 - 00:35:39:09

Zein

And, but you make you make those choices. What I would say, though, is that the what all these moves and all of this growth has been as rich for them as it has for me, but most importantly, it's made us one of the tightest family units you'll ever come across. Because the one constant has been us, the four of us.

00:35:39:11 - 00:36:02:17

Zein

You know, as we move from place to place. And so we've become more each other's friends than just family. And I would think of, Layla and Yasmin as friends as much as I would daughters. Debbie, you know, I know the word partner is often used when people don't know whether to say wife or what, but truly partner in the most meaningful sense of, sense of the word.

00:36:02:19 - 00:36:09:01

Zein

You know, we've got this thing called the, we've got a WhatsApp group between the four of us called the A-Team and.

00:36:09:03 - 00:36:10:13

Reeta

Fantastic.

00:36:10:15 - 00:36:31:12

Zein

And honestly, there'll be a post on it every single day. Every single day. And when any one of us are going through a challenge or something we're wrestling with, they go to the group, before they'll go to anybody else. Oh, wow. You know, and sometimes the advice is, well, you need to talk to or go and think about, but when it starts in that group, it starts with the A-Team.

00:36:31:14 - 00:36:58:10

Zein

And, and that's, you know, that's true. But I do want to come back to Debbie, though. Please. You know, you asked me early on about people that have, influenced you and, you know, by far, by far my most important mentor, coach sounding board is Debbie. By some order of magnitude. Because one of the things you always need in your life is somebody can really tell you like it is who will give you.

00:36:58:14 - 00:37:22:08

Zein

You know, we always say, I want honest feedback. And, you know, line managers give honest feedback, but they tend to try and sugarcoat it sometimes because it's easier for them and easier for you. You rarely get. You rarely find people in life who can be incredibly your biggest champion and supportive, but at the same time, your most constructive critic, and Debbie has been that for me through throughout my career.

00:37:22:10 - 00:37:52:02

Zein

And, and also has been this incredible partner when it comes to things like how do you round yourself out? A small anecdote, if I may. Yes. You know, when I retired from PepsiCo, you know, we had the usual the celebration that everyone standing up was saying very nice things. But they gave me a book, with comments from people all over the organization and obviously all of the leadership and executive team and the board as well.

00:37:52:04 - 00:38:11:13

Zein

But the thing that was most rewarding is, was these comments from people who we could hardly remember, we'd probably met once in our life, because we used to run these, you know, rewards schemes for Salesforce or, you know, Salesforce or frontline operators. And we'd have a big party for them in New York and fly them in from all over the world.

00:38:11:13 - 00:38:36:00

Zein

And, and the comments from people that, you know, I was sat with the, the X, y, z dinner and it was always Debbie. Debbie said this to me and I was like, oh my goodness, we've met this person once in our life. But she could touch them. And, and I used to watch her at these events and this ability to just connect with people, not ask them, oh, where do you work?

00:38:36:00 - 00:38:51:23

Zein

And then we move on. But where do you really work and what do you do and what did you choose to do that and what's involved in doing that. And I learned to do that. As a result. And it was only these years and years later, I understood the real, real value of it.

00:38:51:24 - 00:39:04:11

Zein

These are people who you touched and energized and motivated in a single event, in one touch point. And it's something I've carried, carried forward. But it's a gift. She's given me

00:39:04:11 - 00:39:29:08

Reeta

That's powerful. This it's not just about the deep, deep sense of connection. And it goes to the point you made before that. There's nothing really different between us, but there are many similar hopes and aspirations, and it's a deeper connection. And it's also about being that genuine interest in your story and what's brought them here. So that's a powerful gift.

00:39:29:09 - 00:40:01:15

Zein

And quite often to come back to me and say, but people and so the leadership team is, you know, the so-and-so's done this and had this experience and you feel that doesn't appear in any company resumes. And you do think, well, we'll have and then that just lodges at the back of your mind when you think about somebody who could do some tangential projects that steer something a bit and, yeah, it, you know, it's back to this thing about, do we ever really encourage people to bring their whole self and, do we really understand the full package of skills and strengths that somebody brings?

00:40:01:15 - 00:40:20:19

Zein

Because we compartmentalize it? Yes, into our enterprise, rather than saying, well, way beyond the walls of our enterprise, who is this person? And, yeah, it's so important if you're going to get, you know, if you're going to maximize contribution, but also maximize reward for the individual.

00:40:20:20 - 00:40:46:13

Reeta

Absolutely. And a life of just deep satisfaction. So, if I may, I want to come back to your career. I mean, you've had such a you led and iconic company and iconic brand, as the president of Pepsi, and yet there was a moment when you thought I could just keep going. But maybe I need the

00:40:46:14 - 00:41:09:03

Reeta

World to slow down a bit, and I'm going to step off and do something completely different. For some people. That's just insane. Why would you do that? Seemed so radical. What was the thought process and where were you in life? And when you think back to that, because clearly you've gone on to have another storied part of your life and career and influenced so many.

00:41:09:05 - 00:41:12:02

Reeta

But that seemed like such a pivotal moment. Yes.

00:41:12:03 - 00:41:40:10

Zein

Yeah, it really is. And then the hardest decision is you almost in a working life context, you have a make, there are harder decisions. But, you know, there's always a reason to keep going. And, and when there's the next shiny thing is you can really just stay very focused in a very linear and narrow, context.

00:41:40:12 - 00:42:15:18

Zein

And one of the things, that Debbie and I have always had this conversation on is when you look back, what are you going to think? You know, are you going to think doing more PepsiCo or going and doing something in another company as a CEO and chairman is are you going to look back on that and think that that was that was completing and you know, you get to the point where you think, well, actually, no, it's just more of more of the same in a way.

00:42:15:20 - 00:42:41:15

Zein

And am I going to feel satisfied with the maximum contribution I could have made? And, and you it's hard because it's so easy to put those decisions off. And, you know, you came to the conclusion that you

know. No, I mean, whilst we both are still had energy and an ability to impact and make a difference, we wanted to do something else.

00:42:41:16 - 00:42:57:21

Zein

We needed, to do something else. And so, and people do think you're mad. You know, I think they couldn't understand, thinking I was absolutely insane saying because they kept asking, so what are you going to go and do? And I said, well, I don't know. Well therefore you then.

00:42:57:21 - 00:42:59:13

Reeta

You're really insane.

00:42:59:15 - 00:43:25:14

Zein

Why don't you stay until you know what you're going to do? Because I won't know what I want to do until I go. That's like a chicken and egg tech conversation. And then in the end, you know, you just say, well, it's an important choice, a personal choice. And I'm going to make it, you know, and I'm going to make it and so, you know, and then you get lots of advice and you get lots of people telling you now what you should do once you stop.

00:43:25:14 - 00:43:41:12

Zein

But then you get time to really ground and think about, I want more meaning, I mean, truly more meaning. I've got a lot of skills that I've developed over many years that I can leverage in many different ways. And I'm going to take time to find out what that is.

00:43:41:14 - 00:44:09:21

Reeta

Well, certainly one of the beneficiaries of that question which you posed to yourself is the Mastercard Foundation, because you're the chair of the board of directors. And you've been again, in a way it's like a complete circle because it's about championing the part of the world you love Africa and it's a return to

people, the diversity of a massive continent, the promise, the potential and all the exciting things that are already happening here.

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Reeta

So. And you bring it all together. I think there's huge, clearly huge purpose. But that decision, in terms of finding that, because probably when you made that decision to leave that corporate life to seek something else, and to create that meaning because I think we all create meaning in our lives. That path which was so fortunate to the foundation that you led you to us, and us to you,

00:44:44:10 - 00:44:59:23

Reeta

How do you describe that thinking? Because it wasn't overnight. It was organic, you know, to a large degree. But it was very, very clear in your mind that this one of the most important things you would contribute to.

00:45:00:00 - 00:45:24:16

Zein

You know, you started the question Reeta with, the Mastercard being a beneficiary. You know, I would say I'm a beneficiary of the Mastercard Foundation. Because it's what I was searching for. And it provided an answer. I do want to go back a little bit in time.

00:45:24:18 - 00:45:44:07

Zein

And back to you know, when you make these decisions, what influences you and I remember from the very early part of my childhood, listening to one of the few times I had my parents arguing, and it was because my father had turned down a job to go to be based in the US and do a high profile role for the United Nations.

00:45:44:09 - 00:46:15:12

Zein

And my mother was, you know, we're going to stay in the stay here, and you could have gone and done this high profile job in New York and I remember him rationalizing it, he believed that the right thing for

us was this diverse upbringing in Sudan rather than going to the US, but and a very important but, you know, wherever life took us, he wanted us to have an affinity to sit down in Africa.

00:46:15:14 - 00:46:34:09

Zein

And, you know, I said if you're going to get educated and have a capability then and wherever people end up in life, they need to feel they're going to contribute back here. And so he wanted it as least to be grounded and said and, and grounded in a sense of belonging to this continent.

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Zein

And so that's was the back of my mind all the way through my career, you know, you know, as you grow and you get these much bigger roles and big corporations, it becomes does not become viable to come back and pursue a career in Sudan. But always in the back of your mind is

00:46:52:00 - 00:47:30:07

Zein

Well, how can I contribute, what can I do? And you do things like you mentor, and try and coach and help students and you feel good about that and it is productive. It does it does produce and help. But it's not at the scale. And so I then started to think as I set off basically what I could do myself, and then had this call from, Heidrich about the Mastercard Foundation, and i said, well, I could do something at scale, or at least I could become part of a team that is doing something at scale.

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Zein

And then it's a no brainer. Yeah. I met you. I met Jim, and, just hearing you describe the work of the Foundation. I did talk to Debbie about, can I really contribute to this work? What can I do? And I was questioning myself about how meaningful is a board role.

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Zein

Does it really help impact. And, and we had good discussions on that and yeah, decided that absolutely. And of course since then it's become, you know, and I tell all my other boards this that if I have to choose

one thing, because it will me you have time and I also, well, if I have to choose one thing, it's going to be the Foundation.

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Zein

And, and it's better to tell you that upfront. I will do everything I can for you. But if I ever have to choose one thing, it's that I'm not you.

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Reeta

Nothing like unvarnished truth, in a way. But, clearly, when I look at your leadership in terms of how I've experienced it, you create an environment when you walk into a room and certainly at the boardroom, you create an environment for real listening, for engagement, space for others to share perspective. It's so clear you're in service of.

00:48:49:02 - 00:49:13:06

Reeta

And yet that I don't know whether that's just the brilliant mind come through the gene pool of people, starting with your grandfather, who you said was so sharp and discerning, or that engineer's training, which is able to quickly distill, fall apart a problem, distill the pieces and put it all back together and reconfigure it after listening to all of us.

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Reeta

But we clearly learn and benefit from that. And you do it absolutely without any tinge of ego, but really, in service of the greater good and the problem we need to solve so we can advance and create more opportunity for people. So that's something I just wanted to call out. You've also spoken so much and so eloquently about the real contribution the continent makes to the planet.

00:49:47:13 - 00:50:03:14

Reeta

And whether it's from climate change to the workforce to peace and stability. Would you say more about that? That is a perspective. Certainly, the world doesn't get the benefit of.

00:50:03:16 - 00:50:31:05

Zein

Yeah. You know, I mean, I was very motivated to join the Mastercard Foundation because of the affinity to Africa, but also because of its focus on Africa. I believe you're really contributing. We are really contributing to make this a better planet. You know, when I talk to, people about our focus on Africa, their immediate reaction is, of course, of course.

00:50:31:05 - 00:50:37:13

Zein

You know, a charity should focus on Africa because Africa needs help and it's like, well, yeah, but you need Africa.

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Reeta

00:50:38:10 - 00:51:00:15

Zein

Is the simple truth. You know, this planet doesn't work without Africa. You know we all see these 20, 40 and 50, goals and those goals will never be achieved without Africa not having a seat at the table and being part of the solution. An equal part of the solution. And across many dimensions. You know, we know the obvious ones.

00:51:00:15 - 00:51:22:11

Zein

I mean, the mineral wealth of Africa is well told. But you touched on the other one, the talent, I mean, the youth of Africa are going to be an incredible force for good in the world, so long as we nurture and develop them and make them part of that economic growth engine, of this planet, you know, we are the biggest carbon sink right now.

00:51:22:13 - 00:51:46:02

Zein

And if we don't do it right, we'll become a big contributor like everybody else. Right now, we're helping them, but we have to develop and develop the right way. And the world needs us to do that. They need us to carry on helping, but also develop responsibly. And then, you know, you look at, how the world ultimately will need to feed itself with, with nutritious, nutritious foods.

00:51:46:04 - 00:52:08:20

Zein

Again, I mean, Africa is so important a part of that solution. Our arable land, diversity, biodiversity and diversity of crops and potential crop production, I mean, and I could go on and on and on. So, you know, Africa has to be part of the solution. And Africa also has to have the self-belief, to be part of the solutions.

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Zein

And that's why, you know, again, one of the elements of the foundation which is focused on, on youth in Africa, and we see it all the time. I mean, the self-belief in the young people we are serving today. I mean, you see it every time you go, so the scholars programs, I mean, these young people are the ones who are going to make a difference and they're going to put they're going to give Africa the voice it needs to have in the world.

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Reeta

Saying, you've really captured what the continent offers the world and how important it is that Africans, especially young people, are at the table. As you look across the continent and you think about the diversity from history, culture, language, crop diversity, you mentioned, what is your advice to young people who are coming along, some already in the early parts of their career and beginning that leadership journey, what would you encourage them, and how would you encourage them to think about their lives and creating meaning and creating impact?

00:53:16:10 - 00:53:51:21

Zein

Yeah, yeah. I mean, first of all, I would start out with a just a very clear message to young people that as I've interacted with the young of this continent, it's my case for optimism. I mean, everything I've already seen, shows that they are so much on the right track in terms of the things they care about, how hard

they're prepared to work, their determination to create a better life for themselves, for their families, but for their communities.

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Zein

So there's there's so much, so much to build on. I would say a few things. First of all. Try your own personal growth. You know, and that's, you know, that can sometimes come across as you asking me to be selfish and self-centred, no, I'm asking you to learn, grow, develop, focus on, on becoming the best you can be, because that will give you an agency and a potential to contribute that will grow with you.

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Zein

And the second is, you know, as you're doing that, always maintain a sense of purpose, you know, always have some sense of what will meaning and fulfillment be for you down the road? Because as you build your skills, as you build your, your agency and your voice, you also need to build broader learning and a network of understanding that goes beyond just the linear, another thing that goes with personal growth that I'll just encourage you all to really, really internalize is, be prepared for adventure.

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Zein

Don't think linearly. The most exciting development typically comes from things you've not thought about. And just be up for that adventure when it comes, and grab it and get everything you possibly can out of it. And then, of course, the other thing is, think expansively. And I think that's important for you as individuals, but it's really important for our continent.

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Zein

We need to people are going to think way beyond the boundaries just of their own specific community or country. We are only going to really, rise to the occasion of, solving for Africa, not on a purely country by country basis. You know, we obviously need to make our communities better, our countries better, but we're going to be so much stronger collectively.

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Zein

And we need to think about where opportunities are going to come across the breadth of Africa, not country, country by country. And I say we are as I look towards our young people, most of whom I talk to now, we talk way beyond their specific geographic boundary. And I think have a heart and a determination to really impact the whole continent.

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Zein

And that's, that's the case for the immense confidence in them and, and the future. But first, come back to the one thing. It's just be prepared for a big adventure. Take it, grab it and make the difference through that adventure.

00:56:34:17 - 00:56:53:17

Reeta

That's powerful from the man who's also, your whole life is adventure and has been an adventure. So thank you. Thank you so much for sharing about yourself, your family, and about really how we discover who we truly are and the contribution that we can make. Thank you.

00:56:53:19 - 00:56:54:19

Zein

Thank you Reeta.

00:56:54:21 - 00:57:28:00

Reeta

Thank you. From the vast expanses of Sudan where the seeds of humility and discipline were planted, to the towering boardrooms of global corporations, where he led with clarity and conviction from a young engineer learning to solve problems at precision to global leader guiding systems with wisdom and heart. From driving performance at one of the world's biggest companies to championing equity, education and opportunity through the Mastercard Foundation.

00:57:28:02 - 00:58:01:18

Reeta

From embracing adventure to shaping leadership with purpose. Zein Abdullah's journey is a story of insight, integrity and the courage to redefine what leadership is all about. He reminds us that true

leadership is not about holding on to power, but knowing when to pass it on. Not about commanding the room, but about listening deeply to those within it. Zein Abdullah continues to transcend boundaries.

00:58:01:20 - 00:58:26:23

Reeta

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