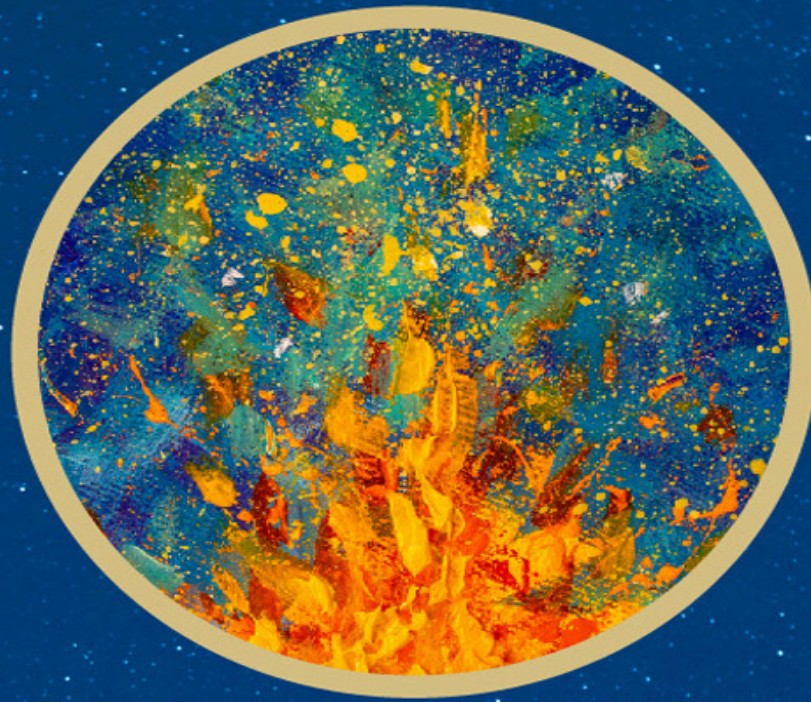


# LEADING TOGETHER



How Brave, Honest Conversations  
Can Transform Our Lives, Organizations,  
and Communities

Steph Roy McCallum

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# PART 1

## Leadership Begins with YOU

Part 1 is where everything falls apart, and I begin again, harvesting the lessons of failure, leveraging pain, grief, and heartache as a source of creativity and change. In Part 1, I come to realize that change begins with me, and with you, not with someone else.

For every leader in the public arena, the experience of standing in the fire of public controversy will be feared and familiar. This is the place where you grow--where crisis forges your character and creates commitments to be a better leader so you can solve problems together with others.

# CHAPTER 1

## Things Fall Apart

I've got nervous sweat trickling down my back under my sweater, and my palms are tingling. I feel slightly nauseous, just on the edge of an upset stomach and I can hear my own voice quaking and trembling as I speak.

My feet are solidly on the ground as I lean on the podium to respond into the microphone, and I'm glad I'm wearing flat shoes so my feet don't ache as the hours roll by with the questioning.

There is a part of me that keeps thinking, *Is this ever going to end?* but I keep batting that voice away to respond to another question.

Some of these people aren't even asking questions; more just voicing opinions and making statements about my general incompetence into their microphones so the video camera can catch their grand gesture. Some work themselves up and call me names with a question mark at the end, so they aren't called to order for a breach of the rules of procedure.

This isn't how it usually goes. I'm a facilitator – I ask the questions and other people have the answers. This time the conversation is about me, and it's being televised. My old mantra of leading high-heat conversations where I say inside my head, "*This isn't about me, this isn't about me, this isn't about me,*" so I can be grounded and present doesn't apply here. I don't have a replacement mantra to get me through this because this *is* all about me.

If this ever ends, I'm going to crawl into a small dark hole and hide for a month. Or maybe a year. I'm humiliated, embarrassed, and wholly to blame for the mess I find myself in. I believe that leaders take responsibility for their impact, and this has been a bitter, shameful thing to take responsibility for.

## **The Path That Led Me Here**

Let me rewind a little.

I lead a consulting firm that designs, implements, and reports on conversations between communities and organizations about really hard issues, so change can happen.

I've been hired by this city to initiate a conversation with citizens about how they should spend the operating and capital budgets. That's a big, tough, messy, complex discussion with some wildly competing views. The city has a declining tax base, crumbling infrastructure, and some really, really tough decisions to be made about services that may need to be cut. They need the community to come to the table to understand and wrestle with these tough decisions and make recommendations on how to move forward.

My team and I spent nine months planning the process and designing the conversation; boiling the budget down into a workbook, creating online and tabletop games, designing workshops and deliberative forums, and training community groups to host their own conversations.

We've brought all our experience and expertise to this project, so people can grapple with the facts, understanding the budget as a tool to provide for quality of life and services that are valued. We know there will be multiple competing needs, opinions, and hopes in this process and we've planned conversations that create space for them.

Clearly that isn't going to happen now.

## **A Storm of Public Shame and Blame**

As I stand at the podium being grilled by members of the city council, it's been one week since we publicly launched the project, after nine months of planning. I submitted my request to be a five-minute delegation at this special meeting of the council – a meeting called specifically to talk about the total public disaster of this project over the last week, and I lean on the podium answering questions for more than four hours, not five minutes.

In that one week the project website was launched...and then hacked and malware was installed, so we had to shut it down and begin the process

of rebuilding a new site.

The online engagement tools were launched with questions about services that make a difference in people's lives...and then attacked and changed so citizens can only vote on options to fire me and my firm.

We launched a Twitter account and a Facebook page for the project... and social media has been on fire with stories accusing us of not knowing or caring about the citizens of this community, and any resident who tries to participate, share a view, or ask questions is shouted down in ALL CAPS by others telling them, "DON'T TALK TO THESE PEOPLE!!! THIS IS OUR COMMUNITY AND OUR CONVERSATION! DON'T ENGAGE. WE WANT THESE PEOPLE GONE. YOU ARE A LOSER AND A TRAITOR IF YOU TALK TO THEM."

We've closed the Twitter account and the Facebook page, so we aren't enabling a forum for some citizens to bully other citizens.

We created a Pinterest page where people could post pictures of what they want to see more of or less of in their community, and someone posted pictures of another community in another country by the same name, and a series of newspaper articles were written about my incompetence, as if I don't know where the community we are working with is located. We didn't post those pictures, but that doesn't matter now.

A hashtag has been trending nationally for six days, and the local, regional, and national media coverage has taken off like wildfire. It's become personal – directed away from the conversation and towards my company, and even about me personally.

We got 1.3 million tweets and retweets in the first twenty-four hours after we launched the project.

Let that sink in.

Nine months of planning and twenty-four hours to become a national sensation, and not in a good way.

It started with a simple question by one of my team members, clarifying an acronym a Twitter user had posted. That sparked a reaction where other Twitter users wondered who was behind the project's Twitter account, and a hashtag was born, and the piling on spread like wildfire. The main focus was to shut the conversation down — because we were from 'away' and the conversation should be led by someone local.

It went from an invitation to a conversation that matters to a total shit show in just days.



Nine months of planning, and just seven days of the public conversation and now I'm standing before the council to account for the giant mess that was meant to be a community discussion about the budget.

The project is co-branded; with the city's name and also the name of my consulting firm – meant to demonstrate that the city has brought in a neutral third party to lead these difficult conversations so there can be no claims of bias or concerns about integrity. Except now the conversation is totally about us and me personally, not about the project

– specifically about getting rid of us and 'taking back' this conversation.

When the furor first erupted, our project partner, the city, suggested that some of the main Twitter users were known to them and the best course of action would be to be silent and that things would die down over a few days. Things didn't die down; they only escalated in intensity.

## **Taking Personal Responsibility for the Mess**

Four days in we decided not to be silent – the conversation wasn't about the municipal budget anymore, it was about my firm and me and our perceived incompetence, lack of credibility, and the desire to replace us with someone local.

I decided to change course; I took out a full-page ad in the local newspaper and wrote an open letter to the citizens.

I apologized and took responsibility for all the mistakes and missteps in the process and I advocated for the conversation, encouraging people to participate in a discussion that would impact their community directly.

I wrote an open letter to the city council apologizing and taking responsibility for the challenges and encouraging them to stay the course – that the passion and intensity being demonstrated meant the conversation really matters.

After those letters ran, I was advised that the city council was calling a special meeting to discuss the project, and I should put in my request to be a five-minute delegation. Which is how I ended up standing at that podium sweating, shaking, and feeling like I might vomit.

When my grilling by the council finally concludes, I'm wrung out. Emotionally and physically spent. I've answered questions as openly and honestly as I can. I've taken responsibility for the countless mistakes and

challenges in the project over the last week because while I didn't install malware, cyber bully citizens into silence, or post pictures of the wrong community on Pinterest, I am the one who designed the engagement process, so in the end I am responsible for what happens with the process. My job is the conversation, and the conversation is a mess, and even worse, people are talking about me, instead of the city budget.

After the televised city council meeting, Councillors gathered in a closed session to decide what to do about the contract with my firm. I got a phone call from the CAO the next day advising me that the council would like me to continue with the work I planned, and that they believe I am the right person to lead this difficult conversation. However, they would like to 'throw a bone' to the people who are outraged and ask that I do the project for half price. I'm shocked at the request but take a deep breath and let him know I will gather my team for a discussion and get back to him in a couple of days.

I gather the team in a hotel meeting room, as many of us in person as possible, with a few others on the phone. We do for ourselves what we do for a living; deliberate on the pros, cons, and consequences of making different choices to move forward. We work through as many impacts and outcomes as we can think of and we weigh doing the project, not doing the project, and modifying how we do the project and what our role might be.

In the end we decide that we are out, that we will not be involved in this process any longer. We've got two main reasons; 1) What does it say about the value of community engagement if it is suddenly possible at rock-bottom bargain-basement prices? We aren't overcharging the city — this is a project of more than a year, intended to allow the city to make really difficult decisions about operating and capital spending. It has, and will continue to take thousands of hours of our time. 2) The other reason we decide not to move forward is that we are no longer perceived as neutral. We can't be viewed as unbiased if the conversation is about us, and there is a worse danger that some people will choose not to participate in the conversation because it is my company or me leading the discussions, and that would exclude those voices. The integrity of the process has been impacted so we are no longer the right people.

I convey that message to the CAO. Over the following weeks we turn over all the materials, processes, and tools to the city. We conclude our contract, and the city pays us for our services to date. The CAO writes a

glowing reference letter about me and our team, and I'm grateful for his thoughtfulness. I recognize there was probably some measure of guilt for how I have been publicly shamed motivating his choice of words, but I accept the letter with gratitude.

However, it doesn't end there.

## The Ripples Continue

There is more to the fallout of this process than a few weeks of public shaming and blame. There is more to this story than the ending of a contract after some mistakes were made, and then moving on with business as usual.

For me, nothing is usual anymore.

I'm raw, shaken to my core, taken down to my knees, and find myself in a deep pit of shame. How did I think I knew what I was doing? Despite having spent over twenty years working in high-stakes situations, I must have just gotten lucky over the last two decades as it seems I have no idea how to handle a conflict. What am I capable of? What do I stand for? I know nothing for certain anymore. All the things I held to be true about how to work in the space of the public arena are up for question. Perhaps all the brutal things said about me on the internet over the last few weeks are all true?

Up to this point, there is a mantra I've held while doing this work.

*"This isn't about me. This isn't about me."*

I've thought this mantra allowed me to hold space for other people to bring their difficult emotions and challenges so I can help them navigate the conversation. It has grounded me and held me a little separate from those who are in the thick of the emotion. I've thought that distance and separation have made me a better facilitator. Except that mantra doesn't work here. Because this is all about me. I've been publicly shamed and blamed on a local, regional, and national stage. Some international colleagues have even taken note.

The fallout continues for months. The cancellation of this contract makes news among colleagues and clients, and a few other companies decide now is not the right time to work with me. They cancel contracts and projects as well. New work dries up; everyone is worried what it will mean

to hire a firm or a managing director who has been humiliated on the public stage.

Colleagues come next; some people who have earned a living working as subcontractors for me over many years ask to disassociate themselves from my company, wanting to be removed from our website and taken off projects. Some of these people I had thought of as friends, and it cuts deeply to think they believe what has been said about me.

The blogs begin, with others assessing me and my handling of the situation, pointing out everything I've done wrong, and how they would have done things differently. It makes some big publications like PR news.

The public shaming continues, this time by my peers and colleagues.

Revenue declines and I begin to cancel the contracts of our temporary staff. Eventually, I lay off some full-time team members. I have to take out a mortgage on my house to keep the company running.

Some new work emerges slowly – interestingly, it often comes from clients who watched the public shaming and commend me for my authenticity, integrity, and courage as I navigated the challenges. Usually they've got really difficult, intractable challenges and they see that a dose of courage and authenticity might be what transforms the conflict they are experiencing.

None of these things is evident to me in the immediate months following the situation. I'm getting up each morning and managing the crisis, but mostly I'm just coping; focused on getting through the day, putting one foot in front of another.

## **Facing the Harsh Truth**

I'm doing all the things that need doing but I can feel just under the surface that my heart is broken, my identity has been called into question, and I'm wandering lost in the woods. I ignore this as much as possible because I just need to get through the days, adapting our approach, managing the now smaller company, trying to harvest the learnings and lessons from this situation.

I realize that the work I do is part of who I am. Some people compartmentalize their work and their identity as separate. For me, working with high conflict and high emotion, and resolving big challenges has

become my identity – I’m the woman who wades in and stands in the fire. Except that this time the fire consumed me, and when it died down, I wasn’t sure who I was anymore. Everything I held to be true wasn’t true.

I realize my mantra of “it’s not about me” allowed me to hide in my work. Like hiding in plain sight, I could lead a challenging conversation but not need to put anything of myself out there.

I could be seen as brave, but not really need to be because I had nothing at stake.

I could be seen as openhearted or compassionate but not really need to be because my own pain wasn’t in the conversation.

I could be seen as capable and credible, but I didn’t have any answers, and what I stood for was just questions other people needed to answer. I could call them out to bare their souls and deepest stories, without needing to do so myself.

I could hide and not be seen because being fully seen is risky, scary, and dangerous.

I slowly begin to host what I call “Fail Fest” conversations, gathering people together to share their biggest mistakes and challenges so we can collectively learn from them. I share parts of this story; it’s raw in the telling and often messy but the sharing of it starts to open the door to some lessons. It feels a bit like therapy and in some weird way it starts to connect me back to myself.

As a few years pass I stumble across this experience of mine written up in countless places; university text books for strategic communications, as a cautionary tale in a Canadian federal government guide for public consultation, blogs, and articles, and I even get word of a board meeting that puts the item on the agenda to discuss what they would do if that happened to them – all written up and discussed without my input or comment in varying degrees of accuracy.

The story has its own legs now, and the ground those legs stand on was a disaster of epic proportions.

I’ve got a small voice in my head that says *“I’m not enough. Not good enough, smart enough, capable enough, just not enough.”*

Before this experience that voice was occasionally loud, but I could quiet it down. Since this experience, it has been hosting an epic party with a cast of thousands, affirming that it was right. Turns out I’m definitely not enough. Now I need to choose what to do with that knowledge.

I start to see that this work in the public arena requires something different.

## **Seeking a New Way**

Being unbiased and neutral isn't the answer, and it also isn't true. We are all biased and view the world through our own lens and experiences, so suggesting we are neutral is a lie that means we don't need to fully show up.

I start to see that these hardest of conversations in the public arena take a new kind of leadership; leaders who show up, take a stand, and have the heart to stay when things get really messy.

I start to see that hiding or standing behind a role, position, or emotional armour separates us from each other and contributes to how easy it can be to blame, shame, and demonize others. That means the antidote might be found in authenticity, integrity, and bringing my own humanity to conversations in the public arena. So much easier said than done, and such a vulnerable, scary thing to contemplate.

As I unravel the personal, emotional, and identity effects on my life, I begin to wonder what it might look like if the world was full of leaders who chose courage and compassion over blame and shame. Those who did the right thing even when it was hard, who brought people together rather than pulled them apart. I wonder what kind of leadership that is, and where to find it. How did I find it in myself and in others?

I knew I didn't have the answers, but it was time to go looking for them.

How we were interacting with each other, the ease with which people's lives and communities were taken apart and dismantled with little thought to consequence, the impacts on people's hearts and souls were being felt everywhere as society splinters and polarizes further into camps and factions.

This horrible, awful, painful experience I'd just been through was turning out to be a hard-won gift, a lifetime of lessons in a few short months.

Here is one of the few things I know for certain: that if you are going to talk about important things with other people there will be times that you will fail.

If you are going to do it publicly, that failure might be witnessed by others.

If you are going to bring people together to discuss tough topics in an environment where blame, shame, vitriol, and an intolerance for imperfection is the norm, then you might feel the pressure and unease of mistakes and missteps.

Here is another thing I know for certain: that when you stand fully in failure, when you call in the tendency towards blame, shame, and perfectionism, when you show up authentically in service to deepening understanding, you can change the environment where you are talking about the most difficult of things, if even just for a few moments.

When we do that, we shift the conversation to explore our full humanity, and that just might be an antidote to polarization and a deep divide. The place to start is in welcoming failure as a path to learning and growth.

## **The Challenges and Gifts of Failure**

Failure is life's way of growing you. If you can stay long enough with the pain, heartache, and shame failure gives you, learning will emerge.

Most people wish for the easiest, simplest path to resolution — the path with the fewest bumps, least discomfort and the 'life hacks' laid out in a checklist. I wish that for all of us too. However, I'm learning instead that there is no easy path to learning lessons, working things out, and making things better when everything has gone sideways. It's really easy to call it a 'fail fest' and it's really hard to be in the moment of failure, staring in the mirror at the sickening realization that you aren't what or who you thought you were and that you've let yourself and others down.

There are a few things I've come to realize about learning from failure. Maybe they will help you begin to think differently about the messy, chaotic, charged space we live in, and how to learn from and lead in all the moments when you don't get things right.

- **Failure will strip you naked and have you run down a crowded street on your own.**

That sounds like a nightmare, and it is. There is no ‘fun’ in failure. It is deeply painful, often full of shame and fear and even grief. It cuts you off at your knees and exposes you to the world. It makes you want to hide, makes your pulse race, keeps you up night after night. I’m speaking from experience. If you haven’t felt these things, then the failure probably wasn’t yours. Maybe you made a mistake or a misstep, but you didn’t fail — there is a distinct difference in terms of impact and scale that distinguishes mistakes from failure. It strikes me that if you can quickly and smoothly talk about learnings and fail fests then you probably made a mistake rather than failed.

- **There are deeply painful, usually complicated, multifaceted stories that go with failure. To tell those stories with integrity, they must be yours to tell.**

I often say in my workshops on brave, honest conversations that when we leave this discussion you should take your own stories with you and leave the stories of others behind in this room; we won’t repeat other’s stories when we leave. In some sectors there has been a focus on ‘collecting stories’ to bring lived experience to life; stories of indigenous people; stories of immigrants and refugees; stories of patients in the health care system.

When you take someone else’s story and retell it for emotional impact you take something precious away from someone else. You can’t dress up someone else’s story and call the learning your own—it lacks integrity and authenticity and becomes performance rather than learning or ownership of failure. You have to own your really hard, painful, difficult story in order to find the lessons in it, and no one else can do this for you.

- **You have to sink into failure to learn from it, and you have to go through the trench to get to the other side.**

When you have failed, especially if it is a major failure, it can feel like a disaster. It makes you question everything about who you are, what you stand for, your credibility, capacity, and abilities. It can make you question your whole life. It hurts physically, emotionally, and intellectually. The beauty and the horror of it is that there is this requirement to experience pain as the path to knowledge. You cannot get there without really feeling the feelings. There is no life hack,



checklist, or step-by-step guide to finding the lessons or getting out of failure faster. There can be deep, transformative learning in failure, but the path to that place is hard and treacherous.

- **You are going to fail.**

If you can let go of your drive to get things perfect or exactly right and be open about getting it wrong when you fail, then it is possible your recovery will be faster. You will have more self-acceptance and be quicker to take ownership of the failure. That will move you from the emotional wasteland of initial failure to recovery and learning.

Many are talking about running towards failure in order to innovate — and the truth is that trying, testing, creating, iterating, and adapting are all steps to true innovation. Organizations and individuals who fail, recover, and get up and do it again are the ones who succeed. That is one of the gifts of failure.

We don't see a lot of that in the public arena, but we could see it if you and I started modeling and making it OK to mess up, recover, and learn together with others. If we give ourselves permission, we also give others permission to fail, and that can change all sorts of dynamics between people.

- **Your failure is your opportunity and your growing edge.**

If you can take ownership of your failings with deep humility and self-awareness, you will find the path out. If you don't own the failure and your role in it with humility and self-awareness there will be few lessons for you. You will be more likely to smooth it all over, dress it up and put a bow on it, choosing armour or a persona to step into.

Failure gives us a window into transformation. It asks much of us and in return it gives back growth, knowledge, and learning. You will be a better leader because of your failure. Failure changes you — often for the better.

That's my list of how to really learn from failure. No checklists, life hacks, or easy solutions. There is no easy way through it. Failure sucks, and failure is a gift. Both of those things are true.

## **Reflect and Practice – When You Fail and Falter**

Reflect on the situations, events, and moments in your life that have been hardest and most challenging for you.

- How can you sink into and be fully present to the challenges and lessons of these situations?
- How can you build your capacity to be with the discomfort of looking into your failure?
- What growth and learning are there for you? How might it stretch and expand your skills, knowledge, and ways of being?
- How will you choose to step into the gift of failure the next time it comes knocking at your door?

You are going to get things wrong. You are going to fail in life and work. Knowing that, you can choose to harvest the insights from the challenges, practicing forgiveness for yourself and others.

When you choose learning and growth, your conversations with others hold the potential to be different, and that's a good thing. That different way is a first step on the road to positive momentum in your life, organization, and community.

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