



Breakthrough by Design podcast series

Breakthrough Boldness: Getting real in sports leadership and beyond with Tamika Tremaglio

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KIM CHRISTFORT: Ever wonder how the best leaders stay grounded, even when they're soaring to new heights? What does it really mean to be authentic, not just in your highlight reel moments, but in the messy, day-to-day ones?

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: *"It's better to be good than to be right. Sometimes the best outcome is from failing... If you're so caught up with 'I can't fail, I can't be wrong,' then we may not come to the right outcome."*

KIM: That was Tamika Tremaglio, a multifaceted leader with an impressive career spanning litigation, forensic accounting, professional services, and sports. She is the former executive director of the National Basketball Players Association and now leads her own sports advisory consultancy. Tamika continues to drive change across industries while modeling what it means to lead with authenticity and reimagine the possible.

Today, we're exploring lessons from Tamika's leadership journey and how "getting real" has led to breakthroughs across her career.

I'm Kim Christfort, chief innovation leader for Executive Accelerators and the Deloitte Greenhouse. You're listening to Breakthrough by Design, where we chat with a diverse array of guests, from scientists to CEOs, academics to athletes, exploring what it takes to get to "breakthrough."

KIM CHRISTFORT: Tamika, thank you so much for being here. I am thrilled to have you on the podcast. Let's start by just having our listeners get a chance to know you a little bit better through some quick questions. I'm going to start with one that I suspect is near and dear to your heart, which is sports. So, we know that sports has been a big part of your life, but I'm curious, if you had to choose, what are you most excited about in the world of sport?

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: So, Kim, really great question, and you're right. If I had to choose, because there are so many things that are so exciting about the world of sports currently, but I think what I'm most excited about is really the power that I'm seeing in the players and the athletes. We're seeing that sports has gone global. So that's huge. And, you know, I love global, and the fact that we can engage in that manner is just amazing because they see how powerful it can be in the US. Of course, I love that we're seeing women in sports because it is just such an amazing thing. But the true basics of sports, where it brings so many people together—regardless of ethnicity, diversity, race, gender—to me is what is so incredibly exciting, and it continues to be that way.

So I'm grateful for that.

KIM CHRISTFORT: I love that. And what about you personally? What sports do you play?

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: Ah, that's very funny. So I always laugh about this because the truth is I was a cheerleader. I think that being a cheerleader is an amazing thing, because you are starting what I believe was really what I was put on this earth to do—that is to serve other people and to cheer on other people and hope that you see other people grow.

And so that's what I did. I even was a cheerleader in college, and I loved it. It's where I found my passion in sports.

KIM CHRISTFORT: I love that. And who or what is your cheerleader? Where do you get inspiration and find somebody that gives you that kind of energy?

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: That's a great, great question, Kim.

I will say that for me, it is about seeing the impact that I can make. In my time at Deloitte, impact was a big thing. We always wanted to make an impact that matters. And I think just the stories that I hear from people or the things that someone tells me that they remember, that's really what gives me [energy]. My energy is really feeling like I have made a difference and an impact on this world.

KIM CHRISTFORT: And that is exactly why we want you on this podcast, because this podcast is all about getting to positive impact, getting to "breakthrough," as we call it. So hopefully we'll use this as a chance to inspire many others to make that kind of impact in the world.

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: Thank you. Thank you so much.

KIM CHRISTFORT: We talk about breakthrough as this idea of getting to positive change, but really from a point where oftentimes you're stuck. And there are 10 principles that we talk about to get there, but one of the ones that I think is particularly challenging for some people, and perhaps natural to you, is this idea of getting real.

How do you actually tap into your own authenticity and others to help get to breakthrough and make that positive change in the world? Now. When I think about your journey, your career is so varied, and you've actually managed to thrive in numerous industries, a plethora of roles across law and professional services, and sports.

How have you navigated these very different environments and cultures? While staying true to yourself, while getting real?

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: Yeah. So, the reality is, I think I learned a long time ago to sort of be comfortable with being uncomfortable. I know that that's the place where you grow the most because most of the time, when I found myself in situations where I wasn't comfortable, I was really growing.

It was stretching me. And so I think that has been critically important. I also think that I understood [that] at a very young age. [In my] early thirties, I helped to take a company public. I obviously had the privilege of being the managing partner of Deloitte in our greater Washington office.

And so it was clear to me from a really young age that I didn't have to be the smartest person in the room, right? But it was a great thing to be able to rely [on] and utilize the resources of others who may have been smarter or needed something more than you did in a particular area and to be able to leverage that.

So for me, that was a really big deal. That's how I could remain true to myself because I never had to fake it. I think it's those moments. So when we feel like we're faking it, it's a huge burden for everyone, right? But if you can be really authentic and say to someone, "I don't understand this..." or "Could you, you know, share with me your insight?" I think that makes a huge difference.

And there are so many people, unfortunately, in this world who are not comfortable saying that there's something that they don't know. They're not comfortable with having to bring a team to the table, whereas I've spent the last 30 years with some of the most amazing

people on my team who have helped to make me a better person.

So I've seen where that has been incredibly crucial and has allowed me to be authentic because the only time that you get it wrong is when you're not yourself, right? You never get it wrong when you're showing up as you are in your true self.

KIM CHRISTFORT: Is there a particular moment that you can think of that stands out when you really did need to lean into that authenticity and maybe it felt a little harder than usual, and if so, how did you actually move through that?

What was the way you were able to just be transparent about how you felt?

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: So, Kim, I think, probably now it's been about 15 years [ago] that I had a wonderful discussion with a mentor of mine, Joyce Roche. And she shared with me that she suffered from the impostor syndrome, and Joyce was exceptionally accomplished.

And so to me, to see this woman who I really looked up to and admired to tell me that she felt like an imposter in situations, it almost gave me permission to do so, and so for me, when I think about a breakthrough and being real, it was the moment that she asked me to share my story, which was not the story that I'd ever shared with anyone, quite frankly, because the goal or the objective for me was to show up at least in a place where people felt like they could rely on you.

You know, you always rested a little bit on your credentials. I had a JD and an MBA, and I thought, let me start the conversation by telling people I had a JD, MBA. I remember, you know, 25 years ago thinking, When am I going to not have to tell people that? When [can I] just be present and understanding a topic or subject [is] just going to be enough?

And quite frankly, it was a really long time before that. So, in those places where I showed up in that room, and I felt like I had to qualify myself, that's when the impostor syndrome set in. And she taught me to quiet that voice. She taught me that actually being vulnerable and being authentic helps

you to actually have real relationships with individuals as a way to build trust to become trusted advisers to your clients, etc., because you could say, I feel uncomfortable or I can't believe I'm sitting in this room with LeBron James and you could actually say that and feel comfortable saying that.

That's real. Those are the things that really matter, because there are other people who are feeling quite the same way. And recognizing that it's not something that only you carry, but that others carry as well, is a really big deal.

KIM CHRISTFORT: So Tamika, you shared a story of how mentorship has really helped you to discover that it's okay to be transparent and be authentic.

How are you taking that forward? I know that you really believe in developing and growing others. How have you taken that forward? What principles do you think are most important in doing that well?

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: So we really learned by doing and experiencing, right? It is very clear to me that our own experiences sort of made us the people we are.

So when I mentioned earlier about Joyce Roche, I could see in her what I wanted to be. And so if she could be authentic and tell her story, if she could talk about the impostor syndrome, I thought, Wow, then I could do that for other people as well, so that now they can see people that are being authentic.

And so for me, it was really important that not only on my team, but in individuals I work with or people that I encountered, that I was showing up authentically, because then that opened up their ability to do that. I wrote this letter a long time ago to my younger self, and I talked about being born to a single mother who was just graduating high school, who didn't know what she was going to necessarily do with her life.

But she knew education was going to be the equalizer—and [I was transparent about] being in a terrible drunk driving accident and sharing that in a crowd of people that I didn't even know. So, being extraordinarily vulnerable at that time, what that did was

there were so many people that came up to me that said, "Thank you for sharing that story".

First of all, because now they felt like, Wow, if she could have grown up in that situation, in that scenario, very similar, perhaps, to how they may have grown up. Then they felt like they could engage in the conversation and talk to me, and felt more comfortable with me. That was eye-opening, because it opened up a whole new world of possibilities for me.

And quite frankly, I think it really helped elevate my career because people who felt like you may have been unapproachable or thought that there is no way we can relate on the same level on anything, now thought, Oh my gosh, now we really can. And I can start to have these same conversations.

I think it really was a game changer, really a breakthrough moment.

KIM CHRISTFORT: Now, I know you talk a lot about the importance of relationships and developing that by connecting at a very human and real level. You have one story I recall about how you did that with the NBA. Would you mind sharing just how you tried to get to know everybody on a more human level?

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: I'll tell you, Kim, I'm a big proponent of kindness and, one of the ways in which I always try to describe kindness to people [is] as being a differentiator for nice. Kindness is really when you're connecting with people from a soul perspective.

Nice is like an ego-driven thing, right? And kindness is certainly when you are lending someone your strength while not exposing their weakness. And so I will tell you the best example of that is that I had gone to the opening game in '23, and it was the LA Lakers and Milwaukee. And when I got there, LeBron [James] was there, and my chief of staff was there, and I had a new chief of staff at that time, and she had actually never engaged in a conversation with LeBron, and so we went back to the back in the locker room, and LeBron came out, and he was so kind. He gave me a hug, and he said, "Thanks for coming to the game," and

he looked at her, and she sort of froze to some extent—not froze, but actually sort of paused—and he said, "Hi, I'm LeBron James."

And she said "Hi" and gave her name. He actually took it upon himself to initially say who he was, because that was his way of being kind without making her feel bad for being nervous or not speaking up quickly, etc.

For me, I know that it was a game changer in my understanding of him and how kind he was. I know for her, it absolutely was a game changer because she thought, Are you kidding me? Of course, everybody knows who you are, but that's about being kind. That's how you build real, authentic relationships.

KIM CHRISTFORT: I love the theme of kindness, and it's interesting because what you're describing with kindness is very closely related to this idea of modeling the right behavior, too. You're essentially setting an environment where somebody feels that they can be real and they can be vulnerable and get over maybe some of that apprehension or impostor syndrome that we often might have.

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: That's absolutely right.

KIM CHRISTFORT: You have two sons. I also have two sons; I would love to learn from your experience here. How have you applied some of this wisdom to them as they've started to navigate their early careers?

And how do you balance this need for them to be competent, be capable, show up well, but also stay true to themselves?

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: Yeah. So, I do have two amazing boys, Rocque and Reese, and my youngest, I just recently said to him that you have to show a little vulnerability, you can't just show on social media all of your best moments.

You have to show when—he's a pro bass fisherman—I said, "You have to show on those days that you're catching minnows and not, you know, real fish, right?" But I also, throughout their life, have been very conscientious about them being resilient.

I know that resiliency is a muscle. It is a muscle that, unfortunately, I learned at a really young age. Out of circumstance for them, they have had a very great life. I think I want to come back as them one day, as I'm sure you do [too]. But the reality is I've appreciated that.

Growing this muscle was really important. And so I always share within the story about the mule and the farmer. And, 'cause there are times, obviously, [when] they get down, they didn't get the right grade, they didn't win the right tournament... that something happened that didn't go their way.

And I always said to them, "There's a story of a mule and a farmer, and the mule falls into the well, and the farmer hadn't used this well for over a decade." And he says, "God, I can't get this mule out. It's 50 feet down." And he says, "I just give up. I'm going to have to bury the mule in there because ... I don't know what to do. I want to make sure that it's a humane thing. And I want to bury the mule."

So, he goes to his neighbors, and he asks the neighbors to help and put dirt into the well. And so he starts to do that, and the dirt, of course, hits the mule. But as the dirt hits the mule, it then hits the ground, and the mule starts to climb up on the dirt. And the neighbors continue to throw in the dirt, but the mule continues to climb.

And I have said to them that the only thing that could happen to you in life when you fail or things don't turn out the way that they're supposed to is [if] you didn't learn from it. So, what you always need to do is to learn from it and move on. And so the reason that the mule then got to the ground was because they got hit down, and they stepped right on the dirt, and they kept going.

For my children, it has been very important to me to let them have those moments where they fail and to just get right back up and to make sure that they learn from their mistake, so that they don't repeat it. Because we all know that if you don't learn from it, you are bound to repeat it.

KIM CHRISTFORT: I love that. I've actually never heard that story before, and it's an interesting one, actually, from a

breakthrough lens, because several of our other principles, I think, are brought to life with that strip away everything. There's this assumption that, well, the mule's gone—might as well bury him. Well, is that really true? And then making a mess where they just started putting in the dirt. Well, suddenly, yeah, new possibilities were visible! You could actually then climb up through that hill. So I really love that.

And you're right with the resiliency in that I don't think anybody's ever said the world is not changing. That's probably the most predictable statement. But having said that, I think that for our kids and for these future generations, there is a lot of change and, how you react to that and how you embrace the mistakes, as you said, in a way that stays true to yourself, is really important.

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: No, it really is. And I will say, Kim, I did oftentimes tell people that what drove me often was not to fail. Right? I didn't want to fail. And I didn't want to fail, not because of me or my own ego; I didn't want to fail, because there were so many people that were looking up to me and needed to see me succeed.

And I think, to some extent, I did myself a disservice, because when those moments came, then you didn't do your best or you didn't succeed at the level [at] which you needed to succeed. You were devastated. It's like those darkest moments, right? But the reality is, when you can look at it, and you actually can pull yourself up—when you can climb up that hill.

That's the lesson that you really want to teach others, because life is going to bring about adversity. And so if you stay real—not get real, but stay real—then you can make sure that you're showing up as your authentic self, and you're really teaching them the lessons that are really going to last a lifetime.

So I was wrong, but that was a breakthrough for me.

KIM CHRISTFORT: It sounds like, also, when you're in these moments when [you are thinking], Gosh, I can't fail, I can't let people down, when you're stuck in a moment like that, you actually explicitly, in some ways,

coach yourself to be real, to remember what matters, to really push yourself to, to get to that next step.

Is that a fair reflection?

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: It is absolutely a fair reflection, but I think sometimes you have to remember that you're not pushing yourself to succeed as much as you're pushing yourself because you can't deal with the failure. And I think it is a distinction, right? Because sometimes you may need to fail.

And I always say it's better to be good than to be right. And the reason that I say that is because sometimes the best outcome is from failing. It may not be the right project. It may not be the right team. It may not be the outcome. But if you're so caught up with [the mindset of] "I can't fail, I can't be wrong," then we may not come to the right outcome, but it's hard.

And it's only because of getting the dirt thrown on my head that I've now realized, but okay, it's okay. You can do this, and you can come out on the other side. I'm calling it the act three, right? Because I think it's so important to be able to do that.

KIM CHRISTFORT: I love that. What does it mean to you to be good?

When you say it's more important to be good than to be right, what does it mean to be good?

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: It means to serve others and that the outcome is best to serve other people. So, I am a true servant leader. And I believe even though sometimes things may not turn out the way you'd like them to turn out or people do things the way in which you want them to be done, if the overall outcome is really good for the most people.

That's what's critically important. And I have found myself in leadership roles where I have certainly had to look out for what's best for everyone. You know, as the executive director of the National Basketball Players Association, it wasn't about the one player; it was about the 450 players. So that's what became critically important—is that's the good, that's the outcome, as opposed to,

did Tamika, you know, say the right words or respond in the right way? Probably not, or maybe I got lucky occasionally, but the reality is I didn't get to the right outcome.

KIM CHRISTFORT: It's interesting because it sounds like breakthrough for you sometimes is yourself realizing I need to get real here and there's a different way of thinking about it, and it's sometimes you realizing there is a bigger picture here for others, and I need to be focused on that. Can you think of a specific breakthrough moment in that sense that's really shifted your career trajectory? And could you tell us a little bit more about that?

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: Yeah, I think I have had so many moments. I have been so incredibly blessed to be in the right places, in the right spaces, with the right people.

But I think it probably started even earlier than when I came to Deloitte, when I learned about exposure and being exposed to things. I always tell people that success was performance, image, and exposure. I know you've heard me say that before in the performance is the education piece, the image piece was really about how you showed up in the room, and part of the reason you could show up in the room in a confident way was because you had the right education and background to know what you were talking about in the areas in which you were expected to be the subject matter act—but the exposure I did not have.

So I had started in a Big Five accounting firm. They had a phenomenal brand, and people relied on them based on their brand. And then I went to a firm where nobody knew its name. And so now I have to start by building my own brand and understanding what that is and really stretching myself. I learned that it wasn't just about performing. It was about being exposed to other things and exposing others to other things. And so that's why, for me, it has always been so critical from a very early lesson to not just focus on the performance and image, but also the exposure. So when I went to the NBPA, the first thing I did at All-Star was to expose our players, because my whole part of being there was around creating generational wealth for them.

So, with the next collective bargaining agreement, we wanted to make sure they were going to have wealth that was sustainable into the future. I wanted to expose [them to] billionaires who had been exposed to other people because they're not typically in that room.

So again, it's by sort of emulating the experiences that you have had the benefit or the blessing to have and making sure that you're doing that with other people to bring them up because everyone would naturally think they're surrounded by people who can help them and understand finance—and they're really savvy in that regard—but the reality? It's about exposed to those people and understanding what that means.

KIM CHRISTFORT: It's another great perspective on breakthrough. One of the principles is called “enlist a motley crew,” and we typically say that because you do need the benefit of other perspectives.

And, in this case, it may be unexpected. People don't think they need that kind of counseling and support. And yet by enlisting this motley crew that's able to give them that wisdom and insight, you're setting them up for a successful future.

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: It is so critically important. You hit it right on the head, having this crew that you can rely on, especially in filling gaps, perhaps that you too don't have. I love that.

KIM CHRISTFORT: Tamika, would you mind sharing some of the ways that you build relationships, some of the creative approaches you've taken?

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: So I do think that relationships are critically important. I think, in particular, building trusted adviser relationships and even, obviously, growing up in a world of law as well, recognizing that even when you may be in opposition on a particular issue, it's important to really understand everyone's perspective.

And so, obviously, we were up against the collective bargaining agreement, and we have to resolve certain issues. Well, I thought, it's really important for us to know who we are engaged with and what's

happening. And so for the first time ever, we had invited the NBA over to the NBPA. And Adam said, “Wow, we've never done this before.”

And we had a full basketball court. I thought it would be great to have little competitions with each other. Right? ... We had someone who was in charge of marketing, someone that was our chief people officer, and find the exact same counterpart on the NBA side.

And so we got together, we had a basketball game. You know, it's funny because when you started by talking about what I did, but from an athlete perspective, I thought [I] probably didn't do as much there. So, of course, I was in an egg-tossing game with Adam, and I remember us walking across the court with a spoon and an egg.

And it was so fun for us! Because it gave us an opportunity to get to know each other, to laugh about something so silly. It helped us to build the relationship. So when those moments came that were really tough, in negotiation, we can think back to the moment that the egg fell, right? It was, you know, we have to make sure we're getting it accomplished, right? We have to make sure we're good as opposed to being right.

And I think that in any situation, the fundamental basis is building relationships and leaning on those relationships and understanding other people's perspectives, as well. That's being real because everyone on each side is very human and has a lot of things that they bring to the table.

KIM CHRISTFORT: I love that. So in those difficult moments, you think back to the egg toss.

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: That's exactly it. That's the lesson from today, Kim.

KIM CHRISTFORT: So I'm curious because we've talked about many different aspects of authenticity of getting real and some of these other principles that actually can help us to do that.

Do you think some of these things are going to evolve as we look to the future, particularly as we get much, more

technology-oriented—maybe people aren't in person together as frequently? How, if at all, do you see this changing?

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: First of all, we certainly learned in COVID that those leaders who were more authentic tended to lead better. I think that that will never change. What I, unfortunately, fear, however, is that people may be less transparent. And what I mean by that is I think people will do the right thing, but they may not be as local about it.

I just think that we are innately really good human beings. And I think it had been a time period where you were measured by the things that you did that were right. And now I think we're in a time period where that may not be important. And you're going to have to learn to do things because it's the right thing to do.

And be really authentic to yourself and do the right thing in a kind way when nobody's watching... when nobody can tell you that you did a good job. I think that's what we're going to see leadership really showing its head, because it's not going to be a way of measuring success. And I hope that those people who are true leaders—and we know we are surrounded by many of them—will continue to do those things, whether or not someone gives them credit for it or pats them on the back and says, "Job well done."

They'll know it's a job that was well done.

KIM CHRISTFORT: That is a fascinating take on "get real." It's the ultimate "get real." Even if nobody's watching, or nobody cares. To thine own self be true.

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: That's right.

KIM CHRISTFORT: Do the right thing. Be a good person. Yeah. So I'm curious as we discuss the future, what's next on your journey?

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: Yeah, so lots of things. I will tell you I'm so excited about this time because I'm calling it the act three to some extent, because I have a phenomenal foundation in consulting, right?

I've been able to do consulting throughout

the world, whether it's in forensic accounting, whether it's organizations, or strategy, etc. I now have a tremendous amount of experience in sports. It wasn't just going to the NBPA in 2022; I have been in the sports arena since 2009. And so now I had not only seen it from an external perspective, but I now also had the opportunity to see it internally, as well. And that made a huge difference. I also have the ability to know what it means to be a leader and what lessons, etc., that I've learned from that. So to be able to bring that to other organizations globally has really been phenomenal.

So I'm excited about what that will continue to bring in this world where we have more women that are involved in sports, where we will now have a global league. It is so exciting. And so I'm hoping and still excited about our abilities to be able to capitalize on all of that.

KIM CHRISTFORT: Fantastic. I'm excited to see where that goes.

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: Thank you.

KIM CHRISTFORT: Now, one thing that we always like to ask our guests is, What does breakthrough mean to you?

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: It really does mean reimagining, reimagining the possible. I say that not just as a colloquialism, but a real way in which I like to live my life. I think "breakthrough" means that you have to think outside of the box, that you have to reimagine things, that it doesn't have to be status quo.

And I think those things that have historically been status quo or remain the same, you're going to get left behind. So you have to sort of break something—right?—to sort of figure it out. I know that's also one of your principles. I learned that from you a long time ago, and I think it is so incredibly important that you think outside of the box, that you are reimagining what's possible, not only for you, for your team, but the world even at large.

KIM CHRISTFORT: Excellent definition. This whole idea of reimagining a more positive future is such a powerful way to talk about

breakthrough. And we've covered a lot of breakthrough ground today. I know that "get real" as one of the principles was particularly one that I felt was in your sweet spot. And, as we talked through it, getting real for you was really as much about your personal behavior for yourself as it was about modeling it for others and really being able to create an environment where you could cascade that authenticity behind and beyond what that moment was.

I loved the focus on kindness and how to make sure that we are leaning into what is good, not just what is right, and constantly challenging ourselves to be willing to step outside of our comfort zone, not just focusing on not failing, but focusing on getting to something better for ourselves and for the people we serve.

Tamika, just to wrap us up today... Do you have any final words of advice for our listeners? How should they be thinking about authenticity and breakthrough in their day-to-day lives?

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: I think you did an excellent job of summarizing this. I think it is really about getting real. I think we are in a current environment where it is going to be more important than ever that we are real and that we show up as our authentic self.

And so I hope that what our listeners will take away from this is that be yourself, be proud of who you are. Be kind to everyone because you don't know what anyone else is experiencing, and reimagine what this world could be if, just by you leading by example, making a true impact.

KIM CHRISTFORT: A wonderful, inspiring close. It's been such a pleasure, Tamika. I cannot tell you how appreciative I am of you making the time and just grateful for the opportunity that our paths get to cross again. Thank you for joining us.

TAMIKA TREMAGLIO: Thank you again. I really, really appreciate it. This is such a great way to spend the afternoon, and I'm grateful for the opportunity.

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