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TRANSCRIPT FROM THE DOWNLOAD, INTERVIEW WITH RONNIE ALTIT & JULIE ALEXANDER

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Ronnie Altit: Hi, everyone, and welcome to The Download. Today, I'm joined by the wonderful Julie Alexander, CEO of Changing Change International, which is a really interesting organisation. It's entirely focused on culture, leadership, and development. It will be great to have a conversation with Julie today. Julie, welcome to The Download.

Julie Alexander: Thank you for inviting me.

Ronnie: It's a pleasure. Clearly, with an English accent there, how long have you been in Australia now?

Julie: It is a bit of a dodgy accent, isn't it? I've been in Australia for literally just over ten years.

Ronnie: Literally?

Julie: Literally.

Ronnie: So ten years and- ?

Julie: It's February, the 29th, that I landed, which doesn't exist.

Ronnie: You didn't really arrive?

Julie: I'm still trying to arrive.

Ronnie: Only once every four years.

Julie: Yes, once every four years I celebrate. Ten years ago I came over to set up a new division for a loyalty marketing company that I was working for in the UK and across Europe, and then came over to Australia after that.

Ronnie: Okay, and then how long ago did you start Changing Change?

Julie: It's been through a few different iterations. Essentially, over the last four, five years it ended up and crafted itself into what is today CCI.

Ronnie: Okay. How did you end up doing this with this interest in culture and leadership, et cetera. Where did it come from?

Julie: Like most people, I think, it's our past experiences that when you look back you can see whether that's all lined up. For me, it was very much around having worked in some really hideous cultures, where there were bullies. When I say bullies, it wasn't just somebody speaking not so nicely to you. It was real bullying where people were manipulated. There was division, there was silos, there was physical threats.

That was one of the environments that I worked in. It was a company when I first joined it. I was there for nine years in total. When I first joined, it was really entrepreneurial. Everybody helped each other. It didn't matter if you were the MD, dived on the phone, answered the phone in the same way because you were all customer-obsessed. By the end of it, we were after quarterly earnings targets and our sales had plummeted, and we had the bullying. I had a few other experiences that were kind of similar.

Ronnie: Was it one bully? Sorry to interrupt. Did you say we had a bully in or we had bullying?

Julie: We had bullying. There was one specific person who springs to mind, who was the lot tail end of me exiting that business. I have worked with other businesses where there've been similar things going on. When I came to Australia, lucky for me, I was actually major redundant after I've been here three years. I've decided to go and try a few different things, try before you buy, try a few different environments.

Actually worked for Business Chicks which is the largest women's network in Australia. I was blown away. What you see is what you get. I remember I went to a funeral in the morning and I actually went to work in the afternoon because I knew I'd feel better in their environment. That was just a bit of a light bulb for me and the fact that I've got a Kindle stuff full of human behaviour.

I'm fascinated by high performance, always been running high performance teams throughout my career. It was just a combination of all of those elements that just led me down the path to go, "You know what, if I can stop one person having one of those days that I experienced, then it's been worth it." Obviously, what I do is far more than just one person.

Ronnie: Absolutely. Interesting couple of things there. Just one thing that I picked up on that you said was, "Luckily enough I was made redundant." I think there's a big message for a lot of people in there, 65% of statistics are made up on the spot. Go with me on this, the average executive will be made redundant at least four times in their career. At the time that you're made redundant, the view is, "Oh my God" sometimes, "What am I going to do," but the opportunity that it presents is really interesting.

I just thought I'd pick out on that one because that happened to me too and I said, "Jeez, I'm so happy that I was made redundant," because I had a big career change.

Julie: I hate being average then because I have been made redundant about four times.

Ronnie: There you go.

Julie: God, that's really awful to be average.

Ronnie: How about we rephrase it so you feel better? On average, an executive— There you go. Is that better?

Julie: [laughs] You're average. Being made redundant, it's all our mindset. What do you perceive it to be? I think it's the Chinese symbol for crisis is danger and opportunity. It's one of those two, look it up. It's all around how you look at it. Yes, there's an initial potential threat. The other side of it is what then is open to you. One of the phrases I used to use a lot is, "Unplug from the matrix."

We have this huge expectation that you leave school, go to university, you get a job, you buy a house. You get married, you have children, and you solve this whole deferred life myth that by the time you're sixty, seventy, whatever, then you finally get to live. For me, it was around take those opportunities very much about embracing change. Ironically, my company being called Changing Change.

[00:05:51] It's really about changing the way that change happens for people and how people embrace that. One of the biggest things that I had was a girlfriend I went to school with. She phoned me up in an absolute panic one day, and she said, "I don't know what to do, I've been made redundant." I'm like, "Yay, congratulations." She's like, "No, you don't understand. It's awful."

I said, "Talk me through it." She said, "Well, I've been here since I was eighteen," that was a few years. I was, "Okay, so what's your payout?" She said, "Well, they've offered me two years money, but I'm not sure whether to take it or to try and get another job in the organisation." "They're giving you two years money, can I just get a few facts straight?" She's like, "Two years money," and that's tax free in the UK, so that's two and a half years money.

"Do you have a mortgage?" "No." "Any big credit card bills?" "No." She's got no dependents, no credit card bills. "What sort of shoes do you have in your wardrobe?" "Well, I've got five pairs. One pair of heels and the rest are trainers." She did not have a big habit of buying handbags, or shoes, or anything.

Ronnie: That's why she had a paid off house.

Julie: That whole thing was paid off. I just had to say to her, "Do yourself a favour, is there not something you always wanted to do?" Go and study something, go and travel, go and give back, go and volunteer for something. Just find out what it is that you want to do rather than just leaping back in. She was scared of having a hole in her CV, nobody would want to employ her.

I shouldn't probably admit this on camera, but I've got holes the size of football pitches on my CV. I said to her, "If you didn't have a hole in your CV, I wouldn't employ you." Like, "What are you bringing new to us?" That's what I see around redundancy, it's around an opportunity to get new skills, new learnings, and embrace change.

Ronnie: Absolutely. There's one thing you said when you were talking about and then we'll just briefly touch on this and we'll move on to some of the interesting things you're doing now. Not the least of which is jumping off 55-foot poles and bridges.

Julie: It has to be done. Somebody has to do it. [laughs]

Ronnie: Something that you did say was that you started at that organisation and it was customer obsessed. We at Insentra call ourselves partner obsessed, as you know. It was entrepreneurial, and the MD get in and answer the phone. That sounds very much like what we are even though we are now seventy-five people in three countries around the world. My question to you is if you were for that, and you were there for when it changed, can you pinpoint anything that specifically happened when that change took place?

Julie: Yes. This is going to sound awful but when the Americans arrived. There was private equity. It all just changed from focus on the customer, focus on the client, focus on the team, and that looks after everything else. When it was suddenly what I call the equivalent of running on the pitch and staring at the scoreboard and expecting things to happen, we went from - just indicative numbers - but say sixteen million customers, a pound a month each, we went down to less than 2p.

It was ridiculous, the amount of money that we lost at that time when we changed focus. It was less about partnering with our clients and our customers and more about what can we get from it.

Ronnie: It was very scorecard driven. That fundamental dynamics of the business changed from being customer focused to being internally, and bottomline focused rather than-

Julie: Purely that. Now, every business needs to look at the numbers, as you know. We need to have an eye on those, but it took precedent over everything else. That was quite a sea change and it didn't go well after that.

Ronnie: Clear enough. Now, Changing Change. You're a speaker, you're a facilitator, you host your own conferences with Changing Change.

Julie: With great speakers.

Ronnie: I've been privileged to have that opportunity to speak at one of those conferences. What do you think that now leadership and culture look like in this disruptive world that we're living in?

Julie: Some of the trends that I'm seeing around is people very much getting the message that this is around connecting people with a bigger purpose than just having a job or just making money, but not necessarily knowing what those right ingredients are. There's still an idea that you can fix it with a leadership course, or you can fix it with getting someone of interest to look at your values.

That's a great part, both of those are elements of it. It has to go beyond that. I go into organisations and they go, "We've done this whole stuff around their values." "Okay, can you show me them?" "Well, we only get them out for a draw when we're doing our reviews." They don't actually live them and they don't know how to live them.

They're the trends around trying to help people find what purpose they may have personally. Again, it's not entrenched, it's not attuned to the whole organisation, which is the difference with what we do is really around attuning the organisation.

Ronnie: How do you do that? What are some of the key things that you would do to take a culture that's okay and make it great is one thing. To take a culture that's crap and make it great is a whole different thing. There are so many things to think about. If we just take on a generic level, you go in somewhere they know that they're okay, they think they need to do some things better. Changing Change International is now being engaged. What's the kind of process that you would take an organisation through?

Julie: It's very much what I call looking at your GPS, your global positioning system. That's all around working out what the Gap is and then looking at what that Plan might look, and then formulating a Strategy. The GPS in terms of the gap, the plan and the overall purpose and strategy is very much around looking at where you need to go.

Also as a GPS, it's not your global positioning system but your global positioning in terms of who do you want to be as an organisation, how do you want to stand out? Your culture's your DNA, your culture's your thing that makes you different. There are other companies that do very similar things to you, but the thing that makes you different is all the things that you do to nurture and support your team and your culture.

That would be the first thing that we do, so that's around culture, then we look at the team. From their perspective, we look at how they can thrive in the culture that's created, and then mindsets and physical behaviours that they need to look at. Finally, we then attune the rest of the business to support both of those things. You quite often get a disconnect between saying that we're really there for the customer, but then the incentive program is completely disconnected. It's about selling widgets.

It's those things or it's your physical environment, making sure that's right. The culture, then your team, and the business all need to be attuned together. That's how we would approach it. Looking

at all of the gaps and filling them, and making sure people are really, really living what they say they want to do. It's only when you really get in and start digging that they got what they hope and aspire their culture to be and that reality, that is really a case of minding the gap.

Ronnie: Spoken like a true—

Julie: Mind the gap.

Ronnie: Mind the gap.

Julie: Yesterday, I was in a room with fifty tradies. I love the fact that they wanted to change their culture. That's not something you would necessarily think of an organisation like that would want to do, but there were some behaviours that were undermining the whole thing and were being allowed to pervade.

Again, those people also, because they were involved in designing the culture, designing the behaviours, the stance and expectations would be, they came up with things like humility. That wasn't a word we saw coming, but they were participating in it. They came up with that word and now they own it.

Ronnie: Part of what you do is involve people in the creation of what the new looks like.

Julie: Absolutely, because if people don't have a say or voice— It doesn't necessarily mean they'll get a vote, but there needs to be direction from the top. If they don't get a voice, it's not an authentic culture from my perspective. It needs to be authentic from the top down, bottom up and everybody in between. Otherwise, you're just trying to live this unrealistic dream of what this culture might be, and it's not sustainable.

Ronnie: What do you see is the biggest challenges for organisations in making a change?

Julie: A big one is fear of the unknown. They know how to do whatever it is that they're doing at the moment, they know what results are. There's the fear of, "I'm going to now launch on this new project. I'm going to invest some money on doing, and I don't know what's going to happen in the meantime." They feel quite exposed doing it, but that's why they work with organisations like ours and come to things like the culture summit to hear speakers.

You shared your story, your journey. It was about the good, the bad, all the mistakes, all of the things that went right. It's around surround yourself with that peer group. Those are the things that you can do to get that, but fear of change, fear of what it might do, and you're going along here.

You might need to take a dip, but then you start that trajectory back up and surpass what you were doing before, but sometimes, the old saying, "You need to pull an arrow back before it can shoot forwards." That's what you need to do when you're looking at your culture.

Ronnie: One of your catch phrases is, "Do, dream, dare."

Julie: Yes.

Ronnie: Tell me more about that.

Julie: Do, dream, dare. The 'Do' part for me is it's not for a lack of knowledge. Anyone of use can pick up a hundred books, if you Google company culture, in 0.7 seconds you'll get billions of answers. It's not a lack of knowledge but it's about a lack of doing what we know. Doing is all around take what you already have to hand and just start making a change now. Just do one thing at a time, bite-sized chunks, and just start doing.

The 'dream' part is more around having this vision for what you really truly want and create that with your team, the vision of what it could be like and what your culture, and the results that you'll be seeing by virtue of that culture being in place. You'll be seeing high performance, you'll be seeing people stood around a barbecue what they'll be saying about your company.

Have a real dream about what it could be, and the recommendations of how easy that your recruitment would be because people would actually opt in rather than having to be enticed in. You get recommendations from people. The 'dare' is all around putting- what I thought I would call because I'm a girl- big girl pants on, and around just going for it and daring to be different.

That's about the disruptive leader. Disruptive leadership is all around putting your culture front and centre. Not being afraid to be different, to stand out, to be that black sheep in a sea of white sheep, and really, really stand firm about your principles, your purpose, and champion your people, your customers and your clients.

Ronnie: Can I ask you a question? Have you ever seen a white sheep?

Julie: They're all a bit murky, aren't they?

Ronnie: They are, aren't they?

Julie: They're all a bit murky.

Ronnie: Don't know why we always say that, but we do.

Julie: We do.

Julie: They're all a bit murky, aren't they?

Ronnie: I just thought that was an interesting- I have visions in my mind and the only type of white sheep I could come up with was a cartoon one.

Julie: There are red ones. They're in the outback because they just get all dusty. I did go to New Zealand and they have very funny coloured sheep over there. That's another story.

[laughter]

Ronnie: Is that where you did some of these sports?

Julie: I did one of them, actually, yes. Very good segue. I jumped off the- I'm always going to pronounce it wrong, the Karawau Bridge. It's the original-

Ronnie: The original bungee?

Julie: The original one, the AJ Hackett. The original one.

Ronnie: I hope they've changed the rope since they started it, but you're here, so they did.

Julie: I think they did. I'm a trained master coach. At the time of doing that, I had a coach.

Ronnie: What is a master coach?

Julie: Because I need to sound important. No, it's the training designation of the different levels of coaching.

Ronnie: As in sport coaching?

Julie: Life, business, that side of things. Rather than just having a weekend course, I spent five years studying and learning all the different facets of behaviour. From that perspective, when I first did a bungee, I actually had a coach. I was moving countries. I was in this awful thing of so much change. I didn't know how I was going to do everything. It was a whole metaphor for letting go.

My coach said to me, "Pick something as your metaphor and have that as your thing." There were a number of things I could have done. One of my friend said, "Why didn't you jump out of an airplane?" I was like, "Yes, but it doesn't scare me." I mean, what's scary about having a big dude strapped to your back? He knows what to do. You just have to allow him to do what he knows. Bungee, for me, was real let go. It was stand on the edge and I had to let go.

Ronnie: That sounds like a fantastic analogy for a leader as well. Often, a leader is standing on the edge and having to let go to be successful.

Julie: You can watch the video anytime. It's hysterically funny, I'm white as a sheet.

Ronnie: White as a sheep, did you say?

Julie: Yes, sheet. Just awful. What was I focusing on? What was I saying to myself? I was just so tense. You can see on the video, it's just awful. There was this pumping music, there was this whole line up of Japanese tourists who'd come to see this. They were all there waiting. The guy says to me, "One, two, three." I just grabbed him and said, "You're going to have to talk to me some more."

I literally was just frozen to the spot. I've been bargaining. I said, "Can I do this, can I do that? Can you push me? Can you jump with me," all these rubbish that I was doing. He said, "You see that bridge over there? Just look at that and just let yourself go." I did say to him, "I remember a girlfriend who said if you put your arms in the air it changes the centre ..." That was it. That was the last word I uttered.

The next minute, I've gone. I'm halfway down going, "Crap, I think I've gone," [screams] as the air pushed out of my lungs, then I was gone. I was over the edge. I couldn't drive for the rest of the day. I felt drunk. I had a girlfriend who'd watched me and all the Japanese going, "Yay." She walked

down the stairs as I walked up and she was in tears. When I saw her I burst into tears as well. It was just that trust.

Since then, I have done other things. I have jumped off a 55-foot high pole. I remember I shimmied up the top. I had this vision in my head of me being first up, getting up to the top doing this beautiful swan dive off. That was the video that was playing in my head. Very different from the bungee where the side's too close, I'm going to hit my head, like all the other stuff that was in my head.

When I went up to the top of the pole and looked over this beautiful Fijian area in front of me, you can actually hear me swear on the video, going, "Oh," because the fear wasn't there.

Ronnie: That's wonderful.

Julie: That's what it's like when you trust and you've let go, and you get to the other side of change. It starts to become easier, but it's crossing that line to start with.

Ronnie: Sometimes crossing that line means you're going to do some study and do some reading. Tell me and tell some of our viewers about your top three books that you'd recommend.

Julie: I've got like sixty-four and read books on my Kindle. I'm a bookaholic. Unfortunately, I then have got audible too, and they start to pile up. Three that immediately jump to mind were The Power of Starting Something Stupid. It's a book by Richie Norton. I was lucky enough to actually have a session and spoke to him. It's something that he started after he lost his son, very, very young age.

It's a whole thing around taking that leap. The most successful companies, most of them just started from a really stupid idea of jeans, selling jeans out the garage. The stories of Apple and all of those sorts of things. When anybody would look at them, you might judge those as quite stupid ideas, but look at them now. It's the power of doing that and not fearing the change, and just embracing it.

None of us get out of this alive so you might as well do it. Leaders Eat Last, great, great book by Simon Sinek. Again, looking at true leadership and what that means. That's around servant leadership. That's around supporting your team to bring out the greatness in them. We set the stage rather than having to perform on it. That's how we talk about it.

The last one is around Primal Leadership, which is all emotional intelligence and how you can utilise that within an organisation. For me, that's a great one, because if you don't know yourself then how can you know others and lead others.

Ronnie: Wonderful. Tell me a crazy experience at work, Julie. You've had so many experiences. You've had some bad ones, we've heard about it. You've got a crazy one for us?

Julie: Yes. I, obviously, was forewarned a little bit that there might be something like this. I thought of one, and how many of them I can no longer tell because they're no longer PC.

Ronnie: They're the best stories.

Julie: They are the best stories. Clients, if any of them are watching this now because I'm still friends with a lot of the people I was clients with. This is from back in the UK days.

Ronnie: Let's keep it anonymous then.

Julie: We'll keep it anonymous, but they will know who they are. We were doing team building and we were doing a treasure hunt around London. We had a list of all the things that we had to go and find. There were many and varied. We had to find a plug. Me and Vi, the head of the area that I was dealing with, and it was a bank, we decided to think laterally. We were just running out of time. There weren't really that many shops. We had a budget that we were allowed to spend.

Anyway, we were enjoying ourselves so much at this point that we actually stumbled across the door of a sex shop and found a plug in the sex shop. That kind of fit the bill. It was a little bit over the budget. In fact, it was quite a bit over the budget but this is perfect. We also had to find some-

Ronnie: You found the plug that fit the bill?

Julie: Yes.

Ronnie: Let's leave it at that, Julie. Let's move away from that story. [laughs]

Julie: The let up of that story is that we knew that they couldn't challenge us on how much money we spent on the plug without revealing themselves. There were a number of people that went, "You couldn't possibly have spent £10 on that," and then they realised what they'd said, and that was it. It was brilliant, it was good.

Ronnie: I'm finding that funny enough. I'm not even going to ask you my usual question which was to tell us a joke because I think that is fantastic. Julie Alexander, CEO from Changing Change International, thank you so much for joining us on The Download.

Julie: Thank you for your time.

Ronnie: It's been wonderful to have you here.

Julie: It's great to reminisce some of those stories.

[laughter]

[music]