

CADRE and JAMS Foundation Present:
Voices from the Field
Interview Clip #2 Transcript – Greg Abell

Marshall: Public education is in a very, very challenging time. You've been doing a lot of work around leadership and leadership coaching and I wonder, as you think about that work, what are some of the most important concepts or ideas that have really, that really influence your thinking?

Greg: Yeah, it's interesting, a number of years ago we were approached by school leaders saying, 'do you do leadership?' I go, 'I don't do leadership, I do dispute resolution.' And that's sort of my canned response and actually I finally had a superintendent just look at me and said, 'do you know how much of my job is spent managing conflict?' And I go, 'Oh, okay so maybe we can help you. 'I think that there's been an, as I reflect on the work, there's been an intersection of sort of three bodies of work and thinking for us. I mean fundamentally for us there's dispute resolution conflict engagement set of work and then you pair that with this idea of leadership and this idea that if you really again look at, fundamentally asses what your beliefs are about leaders, I would say at some place a leader's jobs are to create conflict, because in a leaders' jobs often differentiating them from say managers and managers are great and it's an important skill but leaders jobs are always looking at well this is what is if this is what we want it be. If it's not what we want it to be then leaders are actually calling people to say we need to shift, we need to change, which really brings this other piece into it which is all the literature around change and you read the emerging literature around change and you know, Kegan and Lahey's most recent book on immunity change and say fundamentally when you announce change you trigger a fundamental emotion of the fear of anxiety and when people are perceiving fear and anxiety they perceive threat, when you perceive threat then we go back, back to we're in the context of conflict. So for me, I think that to take on the really, the challenges that education has to take on requires people who can be brave enough and courageous enough to have vision to say, 'you know this isn't really the way we need it to be, it needs to be different.' Compassionate enough to come alongside people and say 'And I'm with you just to help you make this change, but we've got a vision, we need to change this,' and then be recognizing that once you announce that you trigger a bunch of predictable responses which typically show up as conflict and then the fundamental challenge for leaders is how are you able

to be with that conflict. I mean for many leaders, it's like, I don't want to have to do with that, I don't want to deal with that conflict. I'm going, that may not be your choice, because actually one of your fundamental functions as a leader is to invite people outside their comfort zone and when you do that you're going to create conflict and when you do that you need to be with them in that. Which means you've got to begin looking really deeply at who are you in conflict. So that's really where a lot of our work is going with right now, is really helping leaders develop not just the technical skills to manage conflict, but really the personal skills to begin looking at a much deeper level at, well who am I in conflict and if in fact my job or one of my functions or one of my callings as a leader is to really invite people into conflict, I've got to do some more personal work. So, that's really, I think, sort of the next iteration of the work that we're going into around conflict resolution. I mean it goes back to some of the things Bernie talked about yesterday. We're not talking about skills for resolving or managing conflict, we're talking about skills that will help people to be with and to engage ongoing conflict and to stay centered and healthy and as leaders to model. Kouzes and Posner talk about one of the primary leader's, you know, functions is to model the way, you know, to help people model the way in that. So I think that it's interesting that out of our dispute resolution context and culture is we've got a tremendous amount to offer to leadership and in fact I think that what we have is essential to leadership. So it's exciting to then figure out how do we, how do we bring what we bring to that question to add value to what systems are trying to do?