
HE RAISED HIS CHILDREN AS A SINGLE FATHER. NOW HE IS HELPING GLOBAL LEADERS FIND THEIR INNER STRENGTH.

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

single fatherhood, leadership, finding your spike, men's mental health, vulnerability, mentorship, grief and loss, community, unconditional love, the dad project

SPEAKERS

René Carayol, Naroop Jhooti

René 00:00

When my son was four years old, five years old, I couldn't afford the nurseries. We had local childminders, but they started at 8:30. My job started at 9:00. It was a twenty-minute sprint, and I mean sprint. Drop my son off and sprint to work. I'd arrive dripping in sweat. I mean, absolutely caked in it. And I told no one at the office why I had sprinted in. I shared with no one that Brian, my son, and my two brothers were living with me as well.

But the day it all changed and that guilt disappeared was one day I got home and my son was talking to my brothers, and he was four or five, telling them how proud he was of me. Whoa. That's it. The person you want to listen to is your son, your children. There's no other constituency. There's no other audience. There's no electorate. There's no gallery. It's them.

And every now and again, an endorsement from them, a throwaway line, would fuel me for the next twelve months. No guilt, because they know you're doing the best you can do day in, day out. That's it. However, all the measures that society gives us that tell us who we should be, what we should, forget that. There's only one judge in this, and they're your kids.

Naroop 01:54

Imagine carrying the weight of expectations, silent struggles, and the pressure to always have it together. The Dad Project is a space for open, honest conversations about men's mental health. Raw, real, and long overdue. In Season 2, we go deeper, sharing powerful stories and fresh perspectives from those who've lived it and those who help others through it. Filmed at The Old Court in Windsor, this season is about breaking stigmas, redefining strength, and starting conversations that matter.

I'm your host, Naroop Jhooti. Let's talk.

Naroop 02:40

So René, people know that I love to speak. I love doing this podcast, but my true passion is actually public speaking. I love talking on stage. And I remember when I first met you and I saw you talking on stage, and I saw a man with presence, confidence, controlling the audience, but authentic. And that really hit me, because I thought I would love to be able to do that one day: to be able to share stories, talk to people, have influence, and leave people feeling better.

And one thing you said to me was, it's not always about what you say, it's how you make them feel. And that sat with me forever. So, having you here sat opposite me on this podcast is a real honour.

I think I would struggle to do you justice by trying to introduce who you are and what you do. So, I would love for you to tell the audience about yourself, what you do, and what makes you such an inspirational figure.

René 03:23

That's very kind of you.

I'm not sure how many of those things to be honest, but I never forget how privileged me and my team are. We have the tremendous privilege and honour of working with FTSE 100 chief executives here from the UK, Fortune 500 chief executives from the States and everywhere else, and heads of state from around the world.

Where I'm euphemistically called the executive coach, but I couldn't be further from a coach than you could imagine. In America, they call me the CEO counsellor. We look after those people who are honoured to have the toughest job in the world, the best job

in the world, the loneliest job in the world. It's getting tougher and tougher and tougher. At any given time, I'm able to look after five chief executives. I just don't have the bandwidth or the stress capability to do more. It's the most demanding job in the world.

They're not assignments. They're relationships, and they last for life. Some people I haven't seen in twenty years will call me with an issue that needs dealing with now. When I walk into that corner office, I've got fifteen minutes. A coaching session is never more than fifteen minutes. They haven't got fifteen minutes. It's got to be sorted now. We do that around the world, seven days a week, 24/7.

That also leads to the second thing we do. We get insights, experiences, a world's eye view that I'm not sure anyone else gets. Lots of people say they work with chief executives. We work with them in a way that no one else does. So we get the insights, the stories, the upside, the downside, the tears, the emotion, the sackings, the appointments, the disappointments. They're human beings, special human beings.

So I spend a lot of my time standing on a stage talking to an audience, sharing with them some of the insights and experience we gain in our special privileged world. I sometimes think I live at Terminal 5 Heathrow, but it's a privilege, Naroop. I've been winding down for the last ten years; it doesn't quite work. I keep saying I must be in my twilight years, but it doesn't quite work. So I'm honoured, privileged, lucky to talk with some of the best people on the planet in their best moments and their low moments.

Naroop 06:33

So when your family moved from Gambia to here at a young age, did you ever think you would be doing this? Because I know you had a childhood full of responsibility, and that's definitely influenced who you are as a man now. And in your book, Spike, which is a fantastic book, you go into that. But I'd love to hear from yourself about those early years for you: how you managed the transition from moving from Gambia to here, and how it defined you as a man now.

René 07:08

So I live in the greatest city on the planet. This is the capital city of the universe, London. 45% of us in London are non-white. There's no other major city on the planet that could say that, no capital city. And we rub along beautifully.

I'm your archetypal immigrant's dream. My parents, like so many parents of colonial Britain, had primary education, secondary education, but no tertiary, no colleges, no universities. The dream of my parents from Gambia Colony was to get their kids to university. That meant, like it did for so many of our parents, selling up everything, coming over to London, and trying to get them into university.

Even though they sold up everything, when they came here, they thought they could buy a prime property, prime place, prime school. London was the most expensive city on the planet in the '60s. Access to not the best housing meant access to not the best schooling. And for many people, many immigrants, that's where the dream faltered.

I was lucky enough to get to university. And that was the beginning of a chapter where my parents were probably ready to go back home then. They eventually did, leaving us behind: me and my siblings, my brothers and sisters. And what was amazing, and we'll go on to talk about this, they left because I'd gone to university. I could look after my brothers and sisters. And in those extended family networks, we were given responsibility way before we had the capability.

You know, I get this question all the time: 'Leaders, really, are they born or are they made?' I know they're not born. That's a fallacy that holds Africa back, Asia back. We still feel as though that leaders, that big chief male leader, is born. It's nonsense, and it holds us back. It's an issue.

Naroop 09:28

Is that across all cultures?

René 09:33

Across all cultures. No leaders are born. Many are made. But when I'm coaching my leaders, I coach them that leaders are found. They're there available for you. In every team, in every organization, there are leaders there. Go find them. Forget the job title, forget the experience, forget the hierarchy. Leaders come in every shape and size.

You know, there are so many different attributes to look for, but in the main: ambition, aspiration, self-betterment, courage, determination to serve others, fearless, grit. I could go on.

Naroop 10:13

Those qualities that you've mentioned now, they're strong attributes to have, right? And what I find, and I'd love to get thoughts on this, is when we say to a man, because obviously we're talking about men on this podcast, 'These are the qualities of a good leader,' that's a lot of pressure as well.

René 10:31

When you ask a question of someone, when you're trying to help someone to be a leader, talk about their strengths. There's no tick list. You're talking about them. One size fits no one. You want them to be the best leader they can be: talk to them about their existing strengths. They're the attributes they need to be a leader. There is no stress then. You're building upon something they've already got.

So to your point, the toughest thing in the world is giving people unattainable objectives. You ruin them, not coach them. The way we help is: everyone is brilliant at something. No one is brilliant at everything.

What Spike was based on was that through my schooling, my work life, I was always told many years ago there were weaknesses. Today we call them areas for improvement. We call them limitations. 'Focus on your limitations.' By the time you get to 21, here's new news for you: you ain't going to change those limitations. Career acceleration comes from a 5% improvement on something you're brilliant at, not a 5% improvement on something you're rubbish at. No one notices. I say if you've got a light, make it sparkle. Really make it sparkle.

Naroop 11:47

How do men find that light? Because there's so much that we're fed from seeing other people's lives or what we hear on news and media.

René 11:55

It's very simple. Forget all of those. Forget all the psychometric testing. Forget all the coaches, mentors. Forget all of those.

Go to your loved ones, whoever they are. Go to your loved ones. Be it your football colleagues, be it your mother, be it your aunt, be it your gran, be it the newsagent. Go to those people who've got unconditional love for you, and ask them one simple question: 'What do you think I'm brilliant at?'

They're not going to give you management speak. They're going to say, 'You've got eyes in the back of your head. You're always there for me. You've always had my back.' Listen to them. Listen to them. Those people, it's not those people you work with; it's those who have unconditional love for you, who want you to succeed. They're used to catching you doing things right. In the workplace, we catch people doing things wrong. And you need people who want you to be the best version of yourself that you can be.

The more people that love you, the more you ask them, the more variety you get about it. Find the two or three things and focus on them. Watch what it does for your confidence. Watch what it does for yourself, for the way you treat yourself, how you see yourself.

If I wake up every day knowing there are two or three things I'm fantastic at, here's the virtuous circle: the things I tend to be really good at, I tend to really enjoy. The things I tend to really enjoy, I tend to be really good at. What if you woke up every day only doing the things that you enjoyed?

Naroop 13:33

Do you think that's a fantasy though?

René 13:35

No, I do it every day.

Naroop 13:38

But you've worked hard to get there.

René 13:41

No, the trick is to surround yourself with people who are good at the other things. Everywhere I go, I look for those people who do the things I can't, and I stay close to them. Therefore, I'm never exposing myself to the things that I'm rubbish at. It's a philosophy, not a strategy, right? It's a mindset. It's a way of life.

Once I find someone who's really good at something I'm not, I tend to see how I can help them so they can help me.

Naroop 14:13

I love that idea of asking your loved ones about what you're good at. Because as I've been developing this organization and growing, and you've said this to me yourself, people have said to me, 'Naroop, I always knew you were going to do this. I always saw it

in you.' Even though I didn't used to believe it, because I used to look for people outside of my loved circle for validation, approval, acceptance. As I've grown and built this, they said, 'Yeah, I knew you were going to do this. You were always meant to be on stage. You were always meant to be the founder on screen, inspiring.' And I never fully accepted it.

René 14:51

If you don't mind me saying, yes, I've seen a tension in you, and I've seen it change. The tension is a fair one for many of us, the way we've been brought up, especially sons and daughters of immigrants: to serve, to help others, to ensure that everyone around us is the best they can be. That's the way we've been brought up, and there's something very positive about that.

But there are some issues. When do you find time to nourish yourself? When do you look at your own wellbeing when you're forever doing a really good thing: service to others? I've seen you give service to others all the time. And when do you serve yourself? Sometimes we've been brought up that that's selfish, that's self-centred. It's not about you. And that's very powerful and very positive.

But I think there's a time when it's not damaging to take some time out for yourself. And the bit I'm seeing in you and I'm enjoying in you is you're starting to understand who you are, what you bring, and not afraid to say it. And that's important for everyone: be true to yourself.

On occasion, that makes us a little vulnerable: 'I am going to take a moment to talk about the things I would like to do, my achievements, where I'd like to be.' And in many of our societies, that's frowned upon.

Naroop 16:25

Why is it frowned upon, do you think?

René 16:28

Many of us come from a colonial background, and that colonial background said that we were never good enough. Our job was to serve. And it's taken many, many years of travel for me to go around and see.

I've just come back from Saint Kitts and Nevis. Before every session I was running, there'd be ten minutes of prayer. There's something healthy about that, but not all the room was Christian. There was no accommodation for that, and no one felt it was their place to say

anything. I had to say I felt uncomfortable. So I told them, 'We're in a place of work here. I'm coming here to speak to everyone. I'll be as inclusive as faith is important. But is it your faith, my faith, or our faith?'

In time, many of us were given our religions, given our job titles, given our place. It's taken a long time to change that, but it's changing. It's changing quickly.

I said to you that London is a special city. I've learned in my travels that I get uncomfortable in monocultures, when I go to a city that's predominantly one culture: where I was born, Gambia; when I go to Rome; when I go to Madrid; when I go to Amsterdam. I can't wait to come back to London, because I've realized I'm cosmopolitan, metropolitan, and I love the fact I've come from an inclusive background where it's a hodgepodge.

In one road, I'll hear a Portuguese accent, I'll hear a Hindu accent, I'll hear a Bengali accent. And it makes me feel at home and at one. Now that's powerful. Not everywhere is like that. I'm hoping that in time we'll all be so much more tolerant of those from different backgrounds.

Naroop 18:32

What was life like when you came from Gambia? Because reading Spike and hearing about your journey and what you achieved, you were the youngest board member at Pepsi, right? And first Black board member of Pepsi. How did you navigate raising your siblings, staying mentally strong enough to not fold under that pressure? Because I think men of your generation when you were growing up, you just got on with it. But I'm sure there must have been struggles. These are conversations I've never actually had with you. We don't talk about this enough.

René 19:12

Well, everyone talks about the things that matter on the journeys we're on and how we got there. So, three things for you.

The first bit is Harvard did some research three years ago that was groundbreaking for my coaching. They came up with two stats that are really obvious, but game-changing. Number one: mentees get a 16% career acceleration from a mentoring relationship. We all get that. Mentors get a 53% career acceleration from a mentoring relationship. That's transformational.

So whenever I've been coaching, what we've always had as a standard is: get yourself a mentor. Find someone you admire, find someone you look up to, find someone who behaves in a way, thinks in a way, does things that you'd love to replicate. Aim as high as you can. See if they'll spend an hour with you a month. That's it. Done. Go. Now, go find yourself a mentee. Go find yourself a mentee that's not from the same background as you. Go find yourself a mentee that's going to grow you as a leader.

We looked at it closely, and here's what we saw: that person is usually younger, in the formative days of their careers. They're coming to you because you can bring something that helps them accelerate. First, you've got to create an environment where they feel they can speak up, be authentic, challenge you, and find their voice. Psychological safety: that grows you as a leader. Second, you've got to listen with an intent you've never done before. You're not going to judge. You're not going to force them to fit in. You're going to accept them for who they are. This changes you dramatically as a leader for the rest of your journey.

In my journey, that's really mattered. I didn't realize that I was mentoring lots and lots of people and they were coaching me, and that's incredibly special.

Second thing: on my way up, it was really lonely. It was really, really lonely, and more disappointments than appointments, more rejections, but they build you. I found three Black friends, men of my age, also on their career path. I found them in life, and we decided we were going to do something that hadn't been done before: we were just going to set out to support each other and catch each other doing things right. So whenever anyone got a promotion, got an advancement, got some recognition, or achieved something, the other three would send them a handwritten card and a bunch of flowers. We did that for 22 years.

The last Friday of every month, we'd meet for dinner, the four of us, and we'd put the world to rights and support each other. When that handwritten card arrived by post, when the door knocked and the flowers were delivered, guess how that made me feel? We never missed out on each other.

Third thing: on the way up, I used to play a lot of football. At the time I was playing, Black players couldn't get into the best teams, so we formed our own clubs. I played in a Black team, and we were the best team. We won everything that you could win. There were about eighteen of us. When I was playing, I was the only one with a kid. So football was

my one release, but my son had seventeen uncles. Some games I couldn't play; I had to be with him. I was centre-forward, so when I wasn't playing, they missed a little. I was the only one who lived alone with my son. So after matches, we'd come and watch football at my place, the big fights, the big Saturday night stuff. They'd come to my house and we'd sit down. What I didn't realize was my son had seventeen uncles who looked out for him, who helped me with parenting, who helped me. And even today, he's still got them. They still look out for him; they're there for him.

To me, the bit I've learned is: good parents create good children. It takes good communities to produce good parents. And my football club was my community. My four friends were my community. It's only in retrospect you realize that nothing is best done alone at home. There were times when I'd be so frustrated with my son that one of his uncles would step in, pop in, take him away for a day, take him out of the heat, take him to go watch a film. They were all there for me, and that is so powerful.

Naroop 25:09

In these conversations with your four mates, sitting in nice restaurants, what were you talking about? Because it couldn't all have been celebration. There must have been racism, there must have been discrimination. Was that even talked about, or was it only celebration?

René 25:24

It was never celebration. It was all heartache.

Naroop 25:25

What kind of heartache?

René 25:29

The way you were treated: the opportunities that were lost, the doors that were slammed in your face, the opportunities that you knew you were the most capable of doing and it didn't come your way. We needed an outlet. If you didn't let that out, you'd end up giving up. Just the ability to talk about it openly.

We talk about mental health today and we talk about wellness: finding a safe space where people will give you a damn good listening to and not judge you. Empathize, understand, not solve, not cure, but be there for you. I knew that I could have the worst moment ever at work. But my worst moments weren't actually at work. It was being a single father.

Naroop 26:24

Right.

René 26:25

The most demeaning was when I'd turn up for the parents' evening as a Black dad, or I'd go to Gingerbread club with my daughter. With my son, when his mates were coming for an evening or a weekend, it was sort of fine. I wasn't prepared for when my daughter's friends were coming.

By the time my son went to school, he went to the best state school. By the time my daughter came, I was in a different place; she went to the best private school in Hampstead. When her friends were coming over, I didn't think anything of it that I would be driving around picking them up or their parents would be dropping them over. When I opened the door, it never crossed their mind that my daughter's dad was Black. She was best friend of their daughter.

When I'd go around to knock the door and say, 'We've come to pick up Emma,' the husband would come to the door, and it's only when Emma would come running down that they'd sort of realize. I remember how that made me feel.

Naroop 28:05

How did that make you feel?

René 28:06

Just you don't exist. You're not part of the equation. Those were the things we talked about.

Naroop 28:16

What advice did they offer? Because I think that's still a problem today. I still feel that sometimes.

René 28:24

It wasn't advice. It was comfort, understanding, resonance, empathy. We didn't feel we were equipped to change the world then; we were surviving the world back then, ensuring that that didn't stand in our way. We never had the wherewithal, the courage, the access to go and challenge that. We had to survive it. I wanted to punch him, but where would that have got me?

I remember going to the Gingerbread club. My daughter went to the Royal School in Hampstead, as good as you could get in the UK, and Saturday mornings they used to have a Gingerbread club for single parents. They sent me the stuff at home, so I thought I'd go along. They were meeting in some posh cafe, and when I got there, everyone moved their handbags.

Can you imagine? 'Yes, can we help you?' I said, 'I dropped you a line to say I was coming for the Gingerbread club: René Carayol.' We stood there for no more than ten seconds, but in that ten seconds... I can give you a hundred of those stories.

Naroop 30:11

They're still vivid for you though, aren't they?

René 30:14

Like yesterday. And I ended up running and organizing it. Six months later, I was the one doing all the arranging. But I do think the world has changed for the better since those days.

Naroop 30:34

You're right: sometimes we don't need advice, we just need to be heard. And you had your own group that formed organically. Why do you think so many men don't do that now? Why do you think they don't have that?

René 31:02

Something I've seen around the world which is so consistent it troubles me, but I've got a feeling it's probably correct: whether I'm in South Africa, New York State, Edinburgh, or Moscow, we bring our boys up to be courageous. We bring up our girls to be perfect everywhere I go. And that courage can be self-defeating: 'I just need to get through this. I can do this. I'll be fine.' No, you won't be fine. No, you can't do this alone. And don't be afraid to ask for help.

Whereas with our girls, we want them to be perfect. Whenever I get the opportunity to coach female chief executives, we see: here are the five things for the job. The instant response from most women is, 'I can do those two to perfection. The other three I've had no exposure to whatsoever.' We bring our girls up to be perfect, and they're brutally honest. The guys, brought up to be courageous: 'I can do all five. I've done two extensively, and three I've had exposure to' (which means I've read about them somewhere).

I see that difference manifest itself all the time. My daughter will seek her friends out and have conversations. My son, I need to approach him carefully to start the dialogue.

Naroop 32:43

What should a man say if he sees those five things? Should he say, 'I can do those two and I can't do those three'? What's the honest, best way to approach it?

René 32:53

With confidence, no matter who you are. And the bit I always think that's the most telling is: 'I've got extensive experience of those two, and I'll be able to pick those up really quickly in a supportive environment.' Back yourself to acquire new skills quickly.

Naroop 33:23

That's interesting. It's something that I try to adopt, because I've got a wonderful team here who are all amazing at different things, stuff that I'm not good at. I really feel comfortable bringing them in, saying, 'Okay, I'm not good at that; you handle that.' I never used to be able to do that before, because I just wanted to do everything myself. But I realized, like you said, nothing great is ever achieved alone.

René 33:46

The new form of leadership we see is coaching. And coaching is giving people the opportunity to improve their capabilities. It means the leader always standing back. The leader is always empowering, not delegating. Delegating is the old world: 'Naroop, here's two or three things. Go do them. When you finish them, come back to me, let me check them.' That's exhausting for the leader.

To me, it's: 'We need to get to that place X over there. You get us there. If it goes wrong, I'll take ownership. You go make some calls. I'm here when you need me.' You've covered everything that they need. Now, the best people say, 'I've got two or three things I'd just like a bit of clarification on, but I'm going to give it a go even though I haven't done this before.' Knowing that you've got their back, they'll try harder without fear.

Naroop 34:53

How does a leader manage their own mental health in that kind of environment? There's a lot of responsibility to take on: you're asking people to go and do stuff, and if anything goes wrong, you take responsibility. That's a lot of weight to carry.

René 35:09

Best job in the world, toughest job in the world, loneliest job in the world. But you know what? Nothing is best done alone anymore. This is the job I do for my chief executives. They've got a game face on every day. They've got to bring their A-game every day. Every day the whole business, the whole organization is dependent on them being at the forefront. No one can do that every day. When that door closes and they slump into the chair, I'm in that room.

Narooop 35:40

What do you see in that room?

René 35:50

Someone I care deeply about. That's what I see: someone I care deeply about, and I'm going to do whatever's necessary to get them back on that horse. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow. Sometimes my job is to sign them off, get them out of there.

And sometimes, and this is why all the coaching institutions and associations invite me to come and give a talk, because I'm the coaching antichrist. Everything you shouldn't do, they say I do. But by the time I leave, everyone in their organization wants to do what I'm doing. Sometimes I'll go and do what they're supposed to do: I'll go and give the talk, I'll go and run the meeting, I'll go and facilitate the session, because they're not capable at that moment and I don't want them exposed to that. I'll do that.

Narooop 36:39

What gives you the confidence to know that you can do that? Because I know I have to meditate, I do certain things to get myself in the right frame of mind for any event, to take five minutes away to make sure I'm feeling present and in the right mind frame. What gives you the confidence to step up?

René 36:56

The one role in the whole business that there's no training or development plan for is the chief executive. The day they walk into that cockpit, they've never flown the plane before. That's why so many crash and burn within the first six months. But I'm sitting in there, and I've flown the plane many times before and I've seen it. I've prevented crashes, I've been in crashes. There's nothing I haven't seen before.

By the time you get to my vintage, honestly, I've been around the block so many times. I've been with the good, the bad, and the ugly. I've been with some of the best you could

ever be with. So I've got a trick for everything. And that's where the confidence comes from. But it's more than that: if I'm not confident, how the hell are they going to feel? The last thing that they need is to say, 'I'm having the worst day of my life,' and I say, 'Oh, I'm not having a good one either; let me tell you how bad things are from my point of view.' No, I've got to be on my A-game every moment.

Narooop 38:05

That's a lot. When do you find time for yourself?

René 38:10

It's a really good question, but I'd answer it in a different way. When you do a job that you love, you never work a day in your life. This ain't pressure. I've chosen to do the things I love doing. The trick is: all the things I'm not so good at, I've got a team that absorbs that pressure. I do 10% of the activity on the front end. I'm in the cockpit, but that plane doesn't fly without all my team doing all the things that they do. I only do the things I'm brilliant at: Spike. So, you know what? I don't have off days.

Narooop 38:55

How do men build that kind of confidence without having titles, or saying, 'I'm a CEO, so I need to be confident,' or 'I'm head of this'? Just someone within the organization, at any stage of their life, how do they build that confidence?

René 39:12

By complete chance, I had a career that put me in positions which exposed my strengths. I worked for people who enjoyed my strengths, who capitalized upon my strengths, who exposed my strengths. Everywhere I've gone since then, I'm able to stick to my knitting. I'm only going to trade on my knitting. I'm only going to take jobs that demand my knitting; I'm not going to go where they demand anything else. Sometimes I get these amazing talks to give, paying God knows what, but they want something I know I'm not good at. I just don't take it.

So after a while, you build a reputation, build a style, build a room. This is the advice I'd give to everyone else: find the two or three things you're outstanding at and try and make that the centerpiece of everything you do. It's not 100%, you'll do other things, but it's the centerpiece. It's at the heart. That's where your confidence comes from. That's where your self-esteem comes from. That's where my wellness comes from.

Narooop 40:27

If I came to a job interview with you, and you said to me, 'Naroop, what are two or three things that your family says you're really good at?' hypothetical situation. Let's say I said, 'My kids really love to play with me, I'm great at fixing my car, I've got a lot of attention to detail, and my brother says that I'm a great cook.' How would a man then turn those random qualities into something that he can action in a workplace?

René 40:59

First thing: they're not random, they're brilliant. Within each one of those, the question I'd ask myself is not 'Do I have a job for you?' It's not a job description. 'Can I make a role that capitalizes upon those things within my team?' That's what I should be thinking, and the answer nine times out of ten is yes.

I don't think I've ever had anyone join my team who's had prerequisite skills that I need. Ever. I've never had a square peg for a square hole. Never. Everyone who comes my way, I think, 'How could they make us better?' And there's a bit of massaging, maybe a little bit of coaching, but it's two or three things they bring that's essential to where I want to take us. Not where we are today; where I want to take us.

I'll tell you the story. The guy that runs our business today, I met seven years ago when he was at university, nineteen years old. He joined me as an intern. He knew nothing about business. I would honestly say that the things he brought to the party, I noticed on his internship: a ravenous hunger. Ravenous. He just wanted to be better, wanted to be the best. He was bright, picked things up very quickly. Not afraid to have a go, not afraid to fail. Not the most confident person in the world, low self-esteem. Brilliant team player, absolutely superb team player. Had everyone's back straight away.

What I soon realized: if I gave him a task that he'd never done before, he wasn't afraid to say to me, 'I think this is how I might do it.' And I'd say, 'Why don't you think about this, this, this?' His response to coaching is the best I've ever seen. Seven years later, he runs the business. Day to day runs it, at 26.

Naroop 43:26

Isn't that based on your vision, that you've got such a clear vision you can see where people slot in? Whereas a lot of men may not meet someone like you.

René 43:37

You're too generous. Number one, I would say it's more about wanting to work. Remember I said to you: it's not fix the people anymore, it's fix the environment. Create

an environment that no matter what your background, no matter how you worship, no matter how you love, no matter how you live, you can bring your authentic self to your place of work. And you will go the extra mile if that environment wants you, not needs you: wants you.

Right now, that's how I coach my chief executives: create an environment where all the talents can come in. They'll rub along together, but if everyone's giving an extra 10% every day, you're going to win. The biggest driver of performance we've ever seen is an inclusive environment where everyone feels they're part of something special. No matter what your makeup, no matter what you bring, we can find a way of utilizing it to the betterment of the business and the organization.

Is it genius? No. That's how football teams are made; that's how sporting teams have been going on for years. There's a reason you're the goalkeeper, there's a reason you're the left back: it's accommodating all the different talents. The one thing I would say the entry fee is: come in and give it all you've got.

Naroop 45:10

Do you think everyone is born with ambition to want to be better, or do you think some people don't want that?

René 45:17

No one's born with anything. Your environment brings it out of you. Circumstance brings it out of you. Sometimes it can take it out of you. But create an environment where people can feel ambitious.

What we've found, and I find this with my chief executives as well: if someone's applying to your company, they want to come and make a difference. So take them seriously. If someone wants to come and work for you, to spend a third of their life on your premises with you, take them seriously. Don't look for perfection. Look for desire. Look for people who want to be there. The organization will give them the rest.

Naroop 46:11

Do you think you would have still had your desire to help people if you hadn't had the background and responsibility you were given at a young age?

René 46:25

It's a great question. I think we're all moulded by our circumstance, our experience. And I was lucky enough to grow up in an environment where my parents helped others. Again, the immigrant background, the extended family: because they left Gambia to come to London, back in Gambia everyone thinks, 'Well, they must be doing great in London.' Mum and Dad had to send things back whether they had it or not.

Anyone who visited from Gambia came and stayed with us, even though it was five kids in a two-bedroom flat. We'd four in a bed, Auntie sleeping in the other room, Uncle's mum... Mum would cook for the uninvited guest. Somehow they made it work. That never leaves you. That extended family ethos that everyone is welcome, and to my mum, be you Jamaican, Indian, American, you are welcome. That's never left me.

Naroop 47:33

One question I would like to ask you, which is something that I'm actually challenged with today, is building a business while being a single father and dealing with a sense of guilt that actually I have to work while putting my child in front of the TV to send these emails. Not feeling like I'm taking away from the child, but knowing I'm doing this for their future. I think a lot of men face the same issue: they want to create the best life for their kids, they're not in a conventional relationship, but yet they feel guilty: 'They might need me, but how am I going to build my business if I'm with you 24/7?'

René 48:16

Naroop, I remember this feeling so well. I remember when my son was four years old, five years old, I couldn't afford the nurseries. We had local childminders, but they started at 8:30. My job started at 9:00. It was a twenty-minute sprint, and I mean sprint: drop my son off and sprint to work dripping in sweat. I mean, absolutely caked in it. And I told no one at the office why I had sprinted in. I shared with no one that Brian, my son, and my two brothers were living with me as well.

But the day it all changed and that guilt disappeared was one day I got home and my son was talking to my brothers, and he was four or five, telling them how proud he was of me. That's it. The person you want to listen to is your son, your children. There's no other constituency. There's no other audience. There's no electorate. There's no gallery. It's them.

And every now and again, an endorsement from them, a throwaway line, would fuel me for the next twelve months. No guilt, because they know you're doing the best you can do day in, day out. That's it. However, all the measures that society gives us that tell us who we should be, forget that. There's only one judge in this, and they're your kids. And I hear my son now that he's a father telling the stories of how we grew up. It's special to me, and that fuels you.

Your return on investment will come, and it'll be better than any rate of return you'll get on any share or any equity in any marketplace: it is the validation from your children that you did your best, and the stories they tell that you were there when you needed to be there. Is it 100%? Is it perfect? Is it a tick? It's none of those things.

René 51:20

I remember: I went to university, and my son was born at the end of my first year of university. Young, unplanned accident. In retrospect, I could say it was probably clear that his mum couldn't cope. She wasn't equipped for that. So when he was six months old, she left.

Naroop 51:53

So you had him full-time?

René 51:55

Full-time. And someone said, 'How did you do that?' What do you mean, how did you do that? What else was I meant to do? Something in my conditioning and the way I've been brought up, it's just: that's my responsibility. And I think my son and my daughter are exactly the same now. It's my responsibility: who else is going to do it?

I didn't know it as a chore. I'm not sure sacrifice was a word I would use; I'm not sure hardship was. It was my proud responsibility. And yet I had a community. That community wasn't Black, it wasn't white, it was a bunch of people who helped me, who were there for me when I needed. Some of them were neighbours, some of them were college mates, some of them were lecturers at the college. If you're prepared to share your vulnerability, there'll be people there to support you.

Naroop 53:05

That in itself is a quote to remember. Do you think your children are richer because of that community that they were exposed to?

René 53:14

Yes, definitely. I think my kids were prepared to have conversations with people in a way that kids in the more formal, more traditional family setup probably wouldn't have had, being able to talk about things that might have seemed more difficult.

Narooop 53:40

Here's a bit of a personal question for you: when the mother of your son walked away, how did you deal with that emotion?

René 53:53

It's a really deep and searching question, and it takes me back. I think what happens over life, we all do this for self-preservation: we delete bits from our lives, we just remove them.

The day I found out that she'd left him, I went down to pick him up and she wasn't there. He'd been there overnight on his own in a nappy in a cot. But I was with my two brothers-in-law, both my sisters' husbands. I was calling, calling, calling, getting no response, and so the three of us jumped into one of their cars and drove down there. Because I was with my brothers-in-law, they shared that shock, grief, pain, whatever it was. And they became my co-parents because they were there. It's a humbling moment. It's a shocking moment. It's a dreadful moment. But they made me realize it was a moment for me: 'What are you going to do?'

Their wholehearted support: we drove straight to my sister's house. And somehow when we walked in, she knew. Everyone I met knew. And it's the sort of support we all need: I didn't have to go and explain uncomfortably. Everybody knew.

Narooop 55:34

What did you feel when you walked in there? Because I know sometimes there is an element of shame for me when I'm in certain environments when it's just me by myself, because I can't help but reflect and think, 'Could I have done better?'

René 55:51

You're offering your care, your heart, your soul, your services, everything about you to someone who is dependent on you. What if you walked away? What if you weren't there? What if you decided it wasn't a priority? What if you decided that you've got so many other things that you need to be doing? You haven't thought about that for one second.

What you've done is the right thing, the big thing, the tough thing, the thing that there's no guarantee for, there's no training for, there's no development for. Guilt: kick that out the window. What you should be is proud as punch. What your kids will be, what your friends will be, what your family will be, is proud of you beyond belief, because no one else can do this. You've done the big thing, the right thing, the tough thing. Never forget that.

Naroop 56:56

Thank you. I appreciate that. When you started that journey from that moment on, were you open with your feelings to people? Did you talk to your family and friends openly, or did you find that you kept stuff inward? Because I know a lot of men find it hard to ask for help.

René 57:19

Two things. I think the first thing is there was so much to do. I never expected to find myself in that situation, and a switch went from 'Life is great' to 'I better get this sorted.' As a way of self-preservation and self-management, I went into task mode: 'Going to sort this.' First I thought I needed another job; I did three jobs. I was at university, so you just did it. I had two brothers living with me; my parents had just gone back to Gambia. Honestly, there is a degree of self-preservation about it: I threw myself into it.

Every now and again you get those moments where you reflect and feel lonely. But every time I did that, I'd look at him: 'What's he going to do if I crumble? What's he going to do?'

My football mates were astonishing. They weren't philosophers, they weren't psychologists, they weren't psychiatrists: they were friends. And they recognized that I was doing something none of them were exposed to. So they'd pop in, they'd be around. They were just support. When I look back now, none of it was sophisticated. It didn't have to be: presence. Mental, emotional presence. They were just around. If I couldn't go training, I couldn't go to football, they'd come around.

Naroop 59:28

Do you think we've lost some of that in society now? Because we're so distracted now, so self-absorbed in our own selves, social media. Some of the stuff that young men have access to today is telling them the opposite of everything you've said.

René 59:53

One of the things that I think is really, really powerful today is having conversations with the men around me of any generation, of any age, that are meaningful: learning how to listen to them, getting them to put real stuff on the table. We can have that in a pinch, in two minutes; we can have that on a seven-hour plane, right?

I was saying to you before: what grows us as leaders is not just being the mentee, it's being the mentor. Every time I have a conversation with someone who's on the outset of their parenting exposure, I grow as an individual. So those conversations are critical. We're doing it today.

Naroop 1:00:44

Do you think you were always destined to be a single dad?

René 1:00:48

Definitely not. I come from the richest extended family tradition you can imagine. However, I think the cards we're dealt with are the cards we're dealt with. We shouldn't be afraid of them. There's no hand we can't play, but nothing is best done alone anymore.

The consistent message I hope you're getting from me today is: if you're looking for someone to be in your corner, they'll be there. If you're not prepared to look, you won't see them even though they're there. Open your eyes, look. There's a ton of people there out to help you. They may not be called father, brother, uncle: it doesn't matter. There's a lot of support out there. There are so many more good people than there are difficult people. Living in a place like London, they're of every hue, every background, every gender. They're there to help and support if you're prepared to find the courage to ask for that help.

Naroop 1:01:58

Within organizations, why is there such an issue around men's mental health? Why are organizations not supporting men enough, do you feel?

René 1:02:11

I take you back to my previous response: we've grown our men to be courageous and our women to be perfect. Those perfect women are prepared to have conversations that us courageous men aren't prepared to have. We think it's brave to tough it out. Organizations have fallen into the same trap.

But you know what? Nearly everywhere I go now, I'm feeling those conversations happening. Not at the rate I would like, not with the numbers I would like, but they're happening. And there's no going back. This won't go backwards.

Naroop 1:02:53

Why is a man-on-man conversation like this so much more powerful than being given a telephone number, like so many organizations do: 'Call this number, you're feeling a bit depressed, there you go'? Why is there a need for human connection?

René 1:03:14

When I'm coaching my chief executives, the initial conversation has to be in person. There is no other way to establish trust. It comes with the body language, it comes with the chemistry, it comes with how we come across. And it's done silently: within the first thirty seconds, we know whether this is going to work. I can follow up with online Zoom and Teams calls, but after four or five, we need to meet again: refresh, re-intertwine ourselves. Nothing beats this personal interaction.

It's not because we're talking; it's because we're sharing, and we're sharing many different things: body language, eye contact. It doesn't need to be long, but it's vital. You'll see it most with your children: sometimes they just need to walk into the room for a few minutes to know that you're there. We're exactly the same.

Naroop 1:04:33

Do you find the CEOs that you coach lean on you in that same way, to be the person who can help with their challenges maybe not only at work but at home as well? Because there is a massive sense of loneliness.

René 1:04:49

Yes, but it's two-way. I'm as vulnerable as they are; otherwise, they won't be. They're giving me stuff while I'm giving them stuff. It's a two-way street. And this is why I think traditional coaching needs to be looked at: it's an exchange.

When I'm in that moment with them, it's in the moment. It's got a sense of urgency, it's real, you can't fake it. It's live and direct, there's no rehearsal. That button's been pressed, and we're exchanging in the immediacy of the moment. There's no choreographing. It's vomited out sometimes, and you've got to deal with it.

Some people mistakenly think it's a bunch of advice: 'You go see the coaching man.' It's nonsense. When I walk in, I don't know what state of undress they're going to be in, or I'm going to be in because of what I've heard. And sometimes we can both end up in tears in minutes because it's so heart-rending.

I had a call at 3:00 on a Sunday morning, and I'm mad enough to take the phone at 3:00 on a Sunday morning: 'René, René, he's just not listening. I've tried everything. I don't know what else I can do.' It was a forty-minute rant. I didn't say a word. At the end he said, 'Thank you. That's really useful. That's just what I needed to hear.' I hadn't said a word! I said, 'That's great,' put the phone down.

At 6:00 that Sunday afternoon, his wife wrote to me and said, 'I reminded him: you haven't worked with him for six years. You haven't spoken for five. He feels great at the moment, but I just wanted to apologize because I tried to stop him from calling.'

It's not an assignment. It's an interdependent relationship. And that's what I'm advising all men to have: you've got to have someone you can make that 3:00 call in the morning to. I didn't say a word, but he felt great. When you've got someone in your corner, you can make that phone call. They're going to give you a damn good listening to, and you're going to feel better, and you can sleep the night through because you know they're there. And what's their job title? Let's just call it mate.

Naroop 1:07:36

That must be beautiful for you to experience, knowing that you've had such a profound impact. A lot of men haven't yet found that person.

René 1:07:43

They have that person. We all do. You can call me at three.

Naroop 1:07:50

I will.

René 1:07:51

And I can call you at three because of the relationship we've had. You won't be offended if I called you at three; in fact, you'd feel really good that I called you. If you call someone at 3:00, they're going to think, 'You think a heck of a lot of me. I'm going to take this seriously.' That's what happens.

We've been brought up and educated in a world where to be courageous means we don't need to do that, that it's a sign of weakness. No, it's a sign of strength. And no matter who you choose to call, I assure you they'll take it seriously, because you're not going to choose at random. If I called you at 3:00 in the morning, not only would you take the call, you'd care about me, you'd be there for me, you'd vouch for me, you'd give up time for me, and you'd check back in again later to make sure I was okay.

Naroop 1:08:57

So much of what you're telling me stemmed from your role as a single dad: having that community, being there for them, them being there for you, and now taking that into the corporate leadership world. This is a totally different approach from what we're usually told: being vulnerable is a massive strength. We're never told that, but now we are through you.

René 1:09:34

After my son was six or seven, I met the woman who was going to be my wife, and we had our daughter. We lost her. So I became a single dad again.

Naroop 1:09:58

That must have been difficult. Have you processed all that?

René 1:10:10

Again: friends, mates.

Naroop 1:10:26

How do you come to peace with that?

René 1:10:43

Mates and friends. She had cancer, so unlike before, we were prepared this time. You can prepare, and I found I was a veteran, having been there before. This time I had a bunch of friends, a bunch of support. It's not easy, as you can see.

Naroop 1:11:13

I feel for you. But these challenges only make us stronger. Is that the right way to look at it: that these challenges forge us to prepare us for greater responsibilities?

René 1:11:28

I think they made me more vulnerable, which was a better thing. First time around, I just task-managed it: ran faster, jumped higher, worked harder. Second time was crushing,

because she had filled all the gaps. All the things I wasn't so good at, she was fantastic at. And my son had a mum, and we had a daughter. The second time round was horrible because we'd built something that was efficient, worked well, great team, leant on each other. But I was equipped. I knew I could do it. I didn't want to do it, but I needed to do it.

Again, my closest confidant this time was my son. He's ten years older than my daughter, and he was just astonishing: he was the brick, he was the wall. She was thirteen when we lost her mother. That's a really tough age. But he played such a part. And I realized then that all my friends gathered around us, maybe not physically, but emotionally. It was like music: I could hear it all the time. Didn't have to see it; I just knew there was support. And the toughest days became good days, because my daughter never suffered, never noticed that there was anything missing.

What happens with single parents, I believe, is that bond becomes unbreakable. The bond between my son and my daughter and me is so strong. I still go on holidays with them; now we go separately because she wants to go somewhere and he wants to go somewhere, but it's great.

Naroop 1:14:23

Do you talk to them about that time still?

René 1:14:29

Yes: Mum's birthday, the anniversary of her passing, Christmas. Those conversations just happen. They used to be really difficult and tough; they're not now. They're positive remembrances of the great times, and that's where it shifts.

What I've found has happened is I've taken on a different responsibility for those of my friends and colleagues who have loss: whatever the loss is, I've become the past master of loss and know what it's like to recover, know what the dark days are like, and know how to be a good listener.

Naroop 1:15:35

I can relate to so much, because when I see a man struggle, I can't help but want to help, because I've been there. Part of the reason why I created this organization is to do that. It's very touching for me to hear these stories from you.

René 1:15:51

Every neighbourhood has them: an irritating neighbour you could ever have, but we all love her. She's now well into her eighties, and she complains about everything. We look out for her; I've got her key, so if we don't see her, me or my daughter wander in to see if she's okay.

The other day she came out and started moaning about the postman. She said, 'Since the postman changed, have you noticed how useless he is?' (He changed about eight years ago!) She said, 'He's always late, he never comes.' Up walks the postman. I said, 'Well, here he is now. Michelle says you're always late.' He smiled and said, 'Well, it's because I stop off at number eight. Michael's eyesight is fading, so I read his mail for him, and that's why I'm always a little bit late coming here.'

I looked at her, and she looked at me; we didn't say anything else. There's always someone somewhere who will give you their time if you're prepared to ask for it. Our postman doesn't have to do that; he's not going to get paid anymore for doing it. He does it every day. Someone had to say that he couldn't read his letters as well, and he got instant help.

So I'm on this never-ending campaign with my leaders, colleagues, and friends: no matter how dark it looks, no matter how desperate it feels, there's light to be had. But you've got to open the window; you've got to draw the curtain back. And it will come from all the areas you've never thought of.

René 1:18:25

My wife's birthday is May the 2nd. My daughter's is May the 1st. So you can imagine the beginning of May in our house: we celebrate my daughter's birthday, and then the second day, even now, is a lump-in-the-throat moment. We look out for each other. On that second day, we drive to the cemetery. She wants to go on her own; I sit in the car or stand outside. She goes down, comes back, then I go. We drive back together. We don't say a lot in the car, but we're there for each other. That's happened every year since, and we're there for each other.

Naroop 1:19:22

As we come to the end of this conversation, what's one thing that we haven't spoken about that we should have discussed?

René 1:19:34

This morning I got up before coming to do this, and there was a report on the malevolent turn that has taken in some of the advice given to young men. There's an avalanche of stats behind it. One of the stats that surprised me was: today in society, 50% of children are in fatherless homes and don't have access to a male role model. 50%.

I came here with a major message for you that if I look back to the dark days when I was growing up, things have got better. But that stat made me pause. It was a clarion call that for every single one of us men, no matter what size, shape, faith, or background, we've got the most pleasing responsibility in the world: to look out for those who are coming after us. The power of a close-proximity role model: you don't need to be perfect, you just need to be there.

What more can we do, all of us, for those who are finding their path? I told you about my three friends: a handwritten note, a bunch of flowers. I can't tell you what that did for my confidence: the power of recognition. Think about my postman, who just takes his time to read some letters. My daughter and my son: they know I have a dark day on May the 2nd every year, and they're there for me.

So I wanted to leave all your listeners with a message, and it's really simple, but powerful: look out for each other. Look after each other. That's all. If we wake up every day in our heads, our minds, and our hearts, looking out for each other and looking after each other, I think we could change this world ever so quickly.

Naroop 1:22:43

I agree. How would you like to be remembered as a man?

René 1:22:52

It's a really great, deep question. I think first and foremost: a decent father. If I have that, the rest is easy: a decent father.

Naroop 1:23:10

For a man who's achieved so much, for that to be your number one thing, I respect you, because same goes for me. This has been one of my favourite conversations, René. Truth be told, you're one of my favourite people because you're a true inspiration. I look forward to deepening our friendship as I embark on this journey to create the change that we both agreed is so necessary.

René 1:23:40

Thank you so much for this. You have no idea the impact you have on others. From the moment I met you, you always stood a couple of yards behind everyone else. Was it deference? No, it wasn't deference. What it was was ensuring that everyone else was okay. I remember that little studio in Acton, the little kitchenette in the corner, Amit's mum ensuring that all of us were well fed and well looked after. But you stood behind her and watched everything that happened, never said a word. No matter who I brought into the studio, you watched: everything was prepared, everything was solid, everything was right. You hardly said anything. But I knew as long as you were there, things were going to go well.

So now when I see you stepping out a little bit more, the first thing that comes to my mind is: it's about time. Second: you're still careful with your steps. You're never going to be any different, but they're great steps. You must continue.

Naroop 1:25:15

And I will. Thank you, René. It's been a pleasure.

René 1:25:20

Good man. Thank you. Thank you.