“A must-read. Tackling loneliness and improving belonging at work should be a priority for every organization and leader. This book is timely, crucial, and practical.”
—Daymond John, Founder of FUBU and Star of ABC’s Shark Tank

CONNECTABLE

HOW LEADERS CAN MOVE TEAMS FROM ISOLATED TO ALL IN

RYAN JENKINS + STEVEN VAN COHEN
Be Interruptible

“All relationships have one law: Never make someone feel alone, especially when you’re with them.” —Unknown

In March 2017, Robert Kelly became the original parent who was interrupted by their child while working from home. Except his interruption happened live on national television and has now been viewed hundreds of millions of times. It was the interruption seen around the world.

During a Skype interview, Professor Robert Kelly was talking live to the BBC from his home in South Korea about the intricacies of politics on the Korean peninsula when his two young children walked in on the interview. Kelly’s wife then came sliding into the frame (literally because she was sprinting down the hallway in her at-home socks) quickly grabbing the children to try to reduce the distraction, salvage the interview, and prevent any further live videobombing.

Throughout the live interview clip, Kelly repeatedly says “my apologies” while closing his eyes as if to try to wish himself out of this extremely awkward moment. Following the interview, Kelly and his wife were embarrassed, frustrated, and devastated that they may never be asked back on the BBC. When asked by the BBC if they could share the video clip, Kelly responded via Twitter stating, “Is this the kinda thing that goes ‘viral’ and gets weird?”

It wasn’t weird. In fact, most people found it wonderful.

The video of the interruption indeed went viral. So many people found themselves chuckling and empathizing with Kelly. Little did the world know that family interruptions during video calls would be the new normal in 2020 and beyond.

As Kelly’s experience illustrates, people wrongly predict how restorative and positive an interruption can be and just how welcoming receivers of an interruption often are.

As the line between work and life continues to blur, we’ll be met with more interruptions. More home interruptions at work and more work interruptions at home.
Don’t Lose Focus of Focus

Interruptions mostly get a bad rap. And for good, research-based reasons. According to the International Journal of Stress Management, employees who experienced frequent interruptions reported nine percent higher rates of exhaustion and a four percent increase in physical ailments such as migraines or backaches. A Journal of Experimental Psychology study found that people make twice as many errors after a brief interruption of about 2.8 seconds. According to University of California Irvine research, it takes an average of 23 minutes and 15 seconds to get back to a task after an interruption.

Interruptions are costly. Interruptions can also be stressful, but so is busyness. Assuming your to-do list is more important than what your team needs from you is a fast track to a lonely workforce.

Interruptibility doesn’t mean throwing focus, productivity, and priorities out the window. It actually means the opposite. Being interruptible is about intentionally placing your focus, productivity, and priority in the right place and on the organization’s number one asset, people. Parting with your most precious resource, your attention, makes others feel seen, appreciated, and included. Productivity is not about squeezing people, but about showing up for them.

Leadership focused on people requires a willingness to be interrupted. Leave never drifting off task to the robots. Drifting off task and wading into the lives of others is best suited for a strong leader like you.

The Plight of Interruption for Leaders

Leaders are the least interruptible and yet they are the ones that need to be interrupted most. The more important and serious you take yourself, the less open you are to detours and interruptions. Three in four employees see effective communication as the number one leadership attribute. Yet, less than one in three employees feel like their leaders communicate efficiently.

Breaking our attention from the email inbox and directing it at a person to really hear what they are trying to convey, is interruptibility. This discipline strengthens our relationship with others and helps us to ultimately communicate more effectively because we are fully receiving the information, said and unsaid.
Leaders are often seduced by the perception of having-it-all-together. They are tempted by the allure of having-all-the-answers. Leaders place these unwarranted obligations on their own shoulders. The unnecessary pressure to be everything to the team causes well-intended leaders to not listen, dominate conversations, downplay non-urgent employee issues, lock themselves in an office, or hide behind back-to-back meetings. All of these actions communicate un-interruptibility. If you’re wrestling with the idea of being interruptible, you may be placing your reputation over what your team actually needs from you. Your presence.

**How to Be Interruptible**

To reiterate, interruptibility is the ability to be interrupted. Here are some suggestions on how to be interruptible gracefully, genuinely, and strategically.

**Create Safety Psychologically:** As discussed in chapter eight, psychological safety allows people to freely ask questions, raise concerns, and pitch ideas without unnecessary repercussions. A key in being interruptible is to make sure the team feels safe to interrupt without consequence.

**Set Expectations:** Identify any absolute distraction-free times or topics and communicate those to the team. Set the expectation with yourself that interruptions will occur, every day. Consider leaving an extra margin at the end of the day or week to tackle any priorities that got rescheduled due to interruptions.

**Transition Well:** If the task at hand requires you to complete your thought, ask the interrupter (with a smile) for a moment to transition your full attention if needed. Knowing they are about to receive your undivided attention will help them to wait patiently. Consider making a quick note to yourself about where you need to pick back up so that you can mentally transition fully to the situation in front of you. If you absolutely can’t be bothered, present a clear path to the interrupter to circle back with you such as “email me” or “let’s meet before tomorrow morning’s meeting.”

**Provide a Preview:** Model for others the posture you take with interruptions.

Examples include...

- Asking good questions, responding positively when people speak up, or actively bringing people into the conversation during a meeting all suggest you welcome new ideas.
- Speaking little or last during conversations or meetings suggests you are much more interested in hearing from others than dominating conversations.

- Be wary of your body language. Frantically typing on your computer, rushing to and from the break room, and constantly wearing headphones are subtle indicators to others that you are not to be interrupted.

**Clarify Your Role:** To gain clarity during an interruption, start by clarifying the role the interrupter would like you to play. Simply ask, “Would you like me to share, fix, or understand?”

  - Share: Listen to share your advice or opinion.
  - Fix: Listen to get to the root of the issue and then provide a fix.
  - Understand: Listen to understand the situation, empathize with the individual, and unlock a new perspective.

Knowing your role during the interruption provides helpful guardrails for how you are to engage in the unexpected situation.

**Know When to Cut It Short:** If you either get the sense that the interruption topic requires more time than you have or if the interrupter cannot clarify what exactly they need from you, then graciously end the interruption. To ensure you conclude graciously, use the term “Forgive me.” This implies you wish you could help or give your full attention, but the current circumstances don’t allow for it. An example might be, “Forgive me. I must get back to my prepwork for tomorrow’s presentation. Contact my assistant with what you specifically need from me.”

If interruptions are negatively impacting more people than you, such as in a large group setting, don’t stand for the interruptions. Address the interrupter(s) in private, quickly following the incident.

Leaders are susceptible for not taking certain action unless they can do it for the whole team. Don’t let that perfectionist mindset hold you back from showing up for those that need you. At times you’ll have to do for one what you wish you could do for all.

Don’t get stalled by the lie that you have to be available for everyone. Just be ready, today and tomorrow, to be available for someone.
In Conclusion

The mark of a confident, compassionate, and admired leader is interruptibility. Responding to others’ need for your time, energy, and focus is nourishing for relationships.

Choose people over all the pings, dings, and rings. Trade convenience for connection. Trade your too-important mindset for a relationship.

Move a lonely workforce from isolated to all-in by making your attention available to others. And if attention is the planet’s most valuable resource, then focus is one of the most valuable skill sets. In an instantaneous and ever-changing world, the ability to direct and maintain one's attention is a superpower.

Be the hero your team deserves by focusing your attention on them.

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Ryan Jenkins, CSP, and Steven Van Cohen, MSOD, are founders of LessLonely.com, the world’s #1 resource for addressing workplace loneliness and creating more belonging at work. Collectively they have over 20 years of experience helping organizations like FedEx, Coca-Cola, The Home Depot, Salesforce, Wells Fargo, State Farm, John Deere, and Delta Air Lines improve their teams. Their work has been featured in Fast Company, Forbes, Wall Street Journal, SUCCESS, Inc., and Entrepreneur Magazine. When they are not writing and speaking, you can find them sampling craft beers, attempting to play golf together, and spending quality time with their respective families. Stay connected with them on social media @RyanAndSteven.

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