

Andy Molinsky Interview (1)

Matthew: Dr. Andy Molinsky is professor, speaker, author, and thought leader on stepping out of your comfort zone to do the important but challenging tasks in work and life. His expertise stems from a long list of qualifications, including being a professor at Brandeis University's International Business School with a joint appointment in the Department of Psychology, a PhD in organizational behavior, and an MA in psychology from Harvard University, a Master's degree in International Affairs from Columbia University, and a BA in International Affairs from Brown University. Today, we're going to discuss Dr. Molinsky's book, 'Reach' and how organizations can use the strategies outlined in his book to build a pipeline of future leaders internally. Thank you for taking the time, Andy.

Dr. Andy: Thanks so much for having me. Happy to be here.

Matthew: Great. Well, to help us learn a little bit more about you, your work and your book, can you share with us a bit about your background and how it led to the work you do now?

Dr. Andy: Sure. So, I think there were a couple of different paths that led to this book about stepping outside your comfort zone. The first path was that my first book before this was a book called 'Global Dexterity', which is about stepping outside your cultural comfort zone. So, I had lived abroad multiple times, I've been very interested in the challenges people face in adapting and adjusting their behavior across cultures. My PhD dissertation was about that, a lot of my early work was about that. And so, I wrote that book, and one of the pieces of feedback I got from that book was, you know, cool book. How about a book about stepping outside your comfort zone in general? Not just across cultures. And, you know, I got enough of those notes that I was like, 'huh, maybe that would be a cool topic'. I also sort of simultaneously had been doing work, academic work, actually about really tough, difficult tasks at work. And I hadn't sort of put the two together in, examples might be, you know, police officers having to evict people from their homes, managers having to fire people, doctors having to perform painful procedures or deliver bad news, things like that. I kind of hadn't put the two together and I also hadn't conceptualized the academic stuff in terms of comfort zones, but it just sort of clicked, and I was inspired to write a second book, and that's how 'Reach' was born. So, I'm a university professor. You know, I teach, I do research, and increasingly over the past, I want to say decade, I've been doing lots of this stuff, lots of podcasts, lots of speaking and training and coaching and so on, because I love interacting with the people out there in the real world.

Matthew: Okay. That's super helpful context. And I think that helps lead us into our main discussion today around how organizations can build future leaders internally. Let's start a discussion around individual development and then move on to discuss how organizations can use your research to build leadership development programs. From your research, what about our comfort zones commonly hold us back from advancing our careers?

Dr. Andy: So, first of all, I'd say comfort zone obviously is a metaphor. Like, you can't ask a doctor to say, where's the comfort zone on that X-ray? I think it's a metaphor for anxiety, really, and/or your threshold for anxiety. And I do think that comfort zones or anxiety holds us back in terms of our careers because there are a lot of tasks when you're moving from one job level to another, one industry to another, one type of work to another, whatever it might be, one role to another, where the set of tasks that enabled you to get to that role aren't the same set of tasks that you're going to have to now perform. So, in other words, an individual contributor all of a sudden needs to be a manager, for instance. And so, like, a lot of the sort of day to day challenging tasks entailed in these roles and in this sort of personal change ends up being, for some people, in some circumstances, quite stressful to do. They can either fumble around and try to do it unsuccessfully, or in many cases, they can avoid it. You know, you can't always avoid it but we were very creative at avoiding things to step outside our comfort zones. Ultimately, I think that narrows our opportunities. The fact that we often do avoid things that make us anxious. And so, you know, either within a company or just people in terms of their careers, their career building and career development end up, I think, sort of, shortchanging themselves because they're held back, whether it's consciously or unconsciously by this comfort zone issue, which again, is really a proxy for anxiety.

Matthew: In your book, you outlined five challenges that make it hard for individuals to step outside of your comfort zone. Can you elaborate on each of those?

Dr. Andy: Sure. So, and I'll also say that what people find useful in trainings or coachings that I do, or even just readers of the book, is that this gives you a language to sort of identify why something's hard, right? So oftentimes we're just like, 'I'm anxious', but this actually gives you language, which I think it does two things. First of all, it gives you some minor sense of control, because you can name it. And then the second thing is that sort of almost implied in the fact that there are words to describe these things is the fact that other people describe them. I'm sorry... That other people experience them, which kind of normalizes it. Like, I'm not the only one, right? So what those five things are, I'll state them first, then would you like me to give some examples?

Matthew: Yes, please. That would be helpful.

Dr. Andy: Yeah. So, the first is authenticity challenge. These are core psychological challenges when you're either considering or in the process of stepping outside your comfort zone. So, the authenticity challenge, the likability challenge, the competence challenge, the resentment challenge, and the morality challenge. Now, you're not going to experience all. Well, you could actually experience all five and that would be really tough. But even one can make it really challenging to step outside your comfort zone, and you might, you know, if there are two metaphorical doors, the door to approach and the door to avoid, because of this challenge and the anxiety that it elicits, you might choose the avoidance door. And so, what we want to try to help people do is approach as opposed to avoid. So, authenticity is the idea that, you know, this doesn't feel natural. Remember, you're stepping outside your comfort zone, you're doing something that you're not used to. An example might be, I don't know, a young entrepreneur having to, put on her grownup voice when pitching to venture capitalist. This is way outside her comfort zone, but she knows she needs to do it to be able to secure funding for her business. But she feels completely inauthentic in that room. I mean, you could think of a gazillion examples for all these, but... The second one, likability is the idea... it's the worry that they won't like this, other people won't like this version of me as I step outside my comfort zone. Remember, you're experimenting with a different self, in a sense, a different set of behaviors and implied identity. And so, what if I act more assertively than I'm used to, because I need to for this role and in this situation, but what if people hate that version of me? What if people are really turned off by that version of me? You know, I haven't even fully embraced this version of me, and what if people hate it? That's what I call the likability challenge, and you see that pretty pervasively. The third is the competence challenge. I'm not good at this. And it actually is a public and a private side of it. The public side is that people will see me as not good at this, and then the private side is like, I know I'm not good at this. So, examples might be, I mean, a very common thing people are afraid of is speaking in public. So, being afraid that you look like a fool giving a public speech, you know, that would be a very common one. So, we've got authenticity, likeability and competence. The fourth is resentment, and that is the idea that you're annoyed that you have to do this. So, sort of like, logically, you might get that you need to do this type of behavior for this situation, you know, in stepping outside your comfort zone. But psychologically, you might be frustrated or resentful that you have to do it. A good example here might be, you're pretty shy, you're introverted, but you're an outstanding performer. You're like top notch. And then you see other people getting the plum jobs in your organization because they're able to make small talk about last night's hockey game with the boss or something like that, because that just happens to come easily to them. But you're resentful because small talk is really hard for you. You feel very awkward, you feel very self-conscious, you feel very uncomfortable. It's well outside your comfort zone and you're resentful that you actually have to do that. Like, why should that matter? Why should, like, you know, my random thoughts on the, you know, Canadians hockey game make a difference, you know, in terms of me getting an assignment that uses the skills that I went to university for four years for, or whatever. Right? So, that would be the resentment challenge. The final is the morality challenge. The feeling that... I mean, I guess it's the feeling that you're doing something wrong, you feel you're doing

something wrong. So, I actually start my book 'Reach' with a story of a young woman, an entrepreneur who ended up having to fire her best friend from her startup. This best friend was one of her early hires, but the best friend was kind of bringing the organization down, and she had to fire her best friend from the startup. That was an example where she felt a number of these challenges. But morality was one of them. And in the book, I articulate others' examples of the morality challenge. These are all subjective, of course. This is in the eye of the beholder. And of course, that's what's important, because emotions emerge from our subjective experience, so it matters how you personally experience these things. So, those are the five challenges.

Matthew: Okay. So, you've now named the five challenges, and you actually, I think at the very beginning mentioned that just putting words in ways to describe this is helpful. But in terms of starting to overcome these challenges, does it depend on the specific challenge or are there tactics that can address all of them? Could you speak to some of the ways that people might be able to overcome these challenges?

Dr. Andy: Yeah, so, I should say that this work, comes from a large set of interviews that I conducted with people across occupations. Describing moments where they had to step outside their comfort zone and the strategies that ended up working for them. So, that's how I kind of, came up with the ideas and the insights into how people could address this. Just so anyone listening doesn't think, I just sort of, you know, came up with this just sort of like sitting in a chair or something. You know, this comes from research. So, you know, no, I think that the strategies are fairly universal in terms of which strategy, in terms of which challenges, to an extent, they could be, you know, it's possible they could be sort of tailored to a particular challenge, but I think they're more general. Would you like me to talk about them?

Matthew: Yeah, you can elaborate on what those... Especially, if they're more general, if there's a way to address all of these. That would be helpful to know.

Dr. Andy: Yeah. So, I found, three sort of group... three different strategies, sort of Meta strategies, larger strategies that people used. I called them, conviction, customization and clarity. Sort of three Cs, just for sake of being able to remember them better. So, conviction is the idea, it's sort of a... it's an antidote to avoidance. So, it's about your deep sense of purpose for why you're doing this in the first place. Maybe on the surface you say, 'yeah, I'm doing this cause I have to', right? But there's probably a deeper reason why you're doing this. You know, maybe you feel it's the right thing for you to do. Maybe you feel it's critical for your career. Maybe, you know, it will make you feel good about yourself. Maybe doing this will enable you to help others, and that's a really core value for you. Maybe doing this will enable you to be a role model for others. I find that in my life as a parent, oftentimes in my... even in my professional

life, when I encounter a situation where I feel like I might... I sort of have like that alarm bell in my head since I was, of course, the person who wrote this book. Like, you know, that, 'hey, am I avoiding stepping outside my comfort zone?' But I'll think to myself, you know, gosh, I'm always trying to encourage my kids to step outside their comfort zone, you know, at an age appropriate level. So, I got to, you know, practice what I preach here. And so, that actually ends up being a tremendous source of inspiration and motivation for me. The point here is that whatever it is, and again, it's very subjective. Whatever it is, find your source or sources of conviction. Like, really think about it. Like, why does this matter to you? And if you can sort of hold that, that ends up becoming a bit of a wind at your back when you're encountering the challenges we talked about before. The goal, by the way, of all these strategies is not to sort of magically erase the discomfort. You're not going to do that. It's to nudge yourself to try something, to take that leap, to try something despite the discomfort that you might have. Maybe a slightly lessened level of discomfort, if some of these strategies work, but still, you'll have probably have some discomfort. But the goal is to nudge you to try it, because when you try something, you can actually benefit from learning. And without trying something, you'll never learn. And so, it's really critical to nudge people to try, and so that's one of the goals of conviction. The second strategy, which I found. This actually really excited me when I was doing this work because I started to see it everywhere, and when I started to notice it, and it was really cool. And so, it's what I call... I ended up calling it customization, and it's the idea that there's no like, single way really to do pretty much any task or whatever it might be. Delivering bad news, engaging in public speaking, giving feedback, asking for help. Whatever situation is challenging for you, there's no single one way to do it. One of the analogies I use is like, buying a pair of clothing and going to a tailor, and the clothing might not fit you just right initially, but the tailor can help slightly adjust it to make it fit a little bit better for you. It doesn't change the fact that this is still a pair of pants or a blouse or a suit or whatever. It still is that, but it's now been customized for you. And that's what some of these strategies can do. So, there are a number of ways that I talk about customization, and then I saw it in action. It could be everything from changing your body language to just selecting certain words, actual phrases or words that are more comfortable for you. For example, I remember, in my book, I think I talked about, or perhaps I didn't, but, a woman from Russia who felt very, very uncomfortable asking to be put on certain assignments as a consultant at work, because in Russia, it was much more top down and you wouldn't ask, you'd be asked. And so, it was hard for her to be assertive, and that was the situation outside her comfort zone. The word that helped her was the word help, actually. She started to use that word. So, she'd say, 'I would love to be able to help the organization'. And she would sort of frame her ask in terms of helping the organization, she wasn't lying. She actually did want to help the organization, but by saying it that way, she felt less greedy, kind of like, and that actually really helped her. So, that's just like a minor example, but there's oftentimes, it's actually the language you use. Sometimes it's a prop that you bring to a situation. Like, I know someone who, whenever she has to speak in public, she wears what she calls her fierce bracelet. It's a bracelet that for some reason makes her feel strong. If I looked at it, if you looked at it, you probably wouldn't necessarily make that connection, but she does, and that's what's important. When I started public speaking 20, 25 years ago, and I was nervous about it. I used to wear a ring on my finger. It was a ring that was given to me, by my great uncle, and he had

found the stone that was in the ring. He found that stone when he was in World War II, in the Navy, US Navy. And he found the stone on a beach in the South Pacific, came back to the US after the war, had it made into a ring, and he wore it his whole life, and I always admired it. It's a cool ring. But then I started to learn how he acquired it. And I started to kind of connect it to courage for some reason in my head. Like, I was like, wow, that's... You know, as a young man, you know, I knew at the time also he had to leave his fiancé behind. It was just a courageous thing to have to do. And so, eventually I inherited the ring actually, and so I started to wear it. And it didn't like erase, as I'm saying, it didn't erase the fact that I was scared to speak in public. Absolutely not. But I would like play with it in my hand, as you might play with a wedding ring or something. And it just sort of made me think of him and made me think of courage and made me think he could do that, I could do this. You know, like, and so like, you know, there are a gazillion ways that you can customize a situation to try to make it just a little bit more comfortable. Remember, we're trying to nudge, we're not trying to like, make some massive change. We're trying to nudge someone to create the conditions so that they're more apt or more likely or more able to try to step outside their comfort zone. And when they're able to do that, what I find is one of two things, perhaps both happen. Not always, but often. Number one, they discover that this is not as hard as they thought it was. And number two, they're actually a little bit better at it than they thought they were. So, in the mind, a fear, the sort of before, before they've tried it, fear dominates and anxiety dominates, and it colors the way that you interpret your capabilities or even how hard the task might be or what might happen to you. We catastrophize, right? But on the other end, if you're able to nudge yourself to try something, you know, I'm about to say nine times outta 10, but that sounds too scientific. Like, a large portion of the time, you're going to surprise yourself and you're going to learn something. And that will kick off a probably a positive spiral where you'll try it again and so on and so forth, as opposed to avoiding. So, that's the whole logic of the book and the perspective.

Matthew: So, we have conviction, we have customized, is there a third C?

Dr. Andy: Oh, there is, yeah. Clarity. And clarity really is sort of like, I found that people who were able to adopt sort of a more even-handed perspective on their situation, not allowing emotion to draw them to one or more extreme, I think of clarity sort of as like an anchor for a boat in a stormy sea, that the clarity is sort of like an even-handed perspective, shades of gray as opposed to black or white in terms of understanding the challenges in the situation. So, if you're... we talked before about public speaking. You know, if you are very anxious about it, your anxiety might bring you to, you know, extremes. You might say, you know, I'm never giving a speech unless I'm a Ted, you know, the best TED talker ever, and I'm going to be a complete failure and I'm going to, I don't know, faint on stage or like, you're thinking in extremes, versus, clarity and having that capacity to sort of adopt an even-handed mindset and perspective. Might suggest something like, you know, I probably won't be the best speaker in the world. I haven't done this that much. But, you know, I probably won't be as bad as I think I'm going to be. It's probably be somewhere in the middle and I'll probably learn a lot and chances are if I

keep doing it, I'll, you know, improve over time. That sort of, more even-handed mindset. And I found that people who were able to adopt that or had that, they had an easier time nudging themselves to step outside their comfort zone. So, that's what clarity is.

Matthew: Got it. So, we have conviction, customizing, and clarity. And those all seem like useful tools for addressing the challenges of getting outside of your comfort zone. Bringing this into the context of organizations and businesses, are there ways that organizations can go about enabling their employees, specifically their future leaders or high potential employees to use these tools to get outside of their comfort zone and grow?

Dr. Andy: Well, I mean, definitely. I think that, so I personally, I'm not sure if this is where you're going, but I personally have done different, you know, interventions in organizations. So, whether it's a, you know, a sort of more inspirational intervention like a keynote speech or sometimes a keynote speech, but also a panel discussion with leaders in the organization who talk about their experiences having to step outside their comfort zone, which is great cause they can sort of be vulnerable as leaders and that can inspire people who are in the audience all the way to, cohorts, small cohorts of people, who work together over time with me, virtually, on their... on a situation that they want to work on, and something that's meaningful to their work and that we learn these tools and then we try to apply them and come back and talk about strategies for... you know, talk about how it went in a group, you know, sort of a group coaching context, and then sort of learn from each other and so on. And that's a very powerful technique because it's over time, it's in a real context and people can learn from each other in sort of a safe setting. So, I mean, those are the examples that I've experienced. I imagine that a lot of companies have used the book maybe in other ways, but I'm, you know, I'm not sure, I'd love to know.

Matthew: And do you think sort of... there's examples you mentioned of having panel discussion with the company's own leaders or having small, group sessions, having the more personal and relevant experience of people you work with, and that context provides even more impact to the message that you're trying to send with the book?

Dr. Andy: Yeah, I think it brings it to life and it enables people to use it as a tool. I should also mention by the way that in one of the organizations I worked in, we also had a mentoring program where people would... Like, not a career mentoring program, but a comfort zone stepping out of mentoring program. And so, people, so each person was assigned a mentor. Someone who I also was able to sort of teach the tools in the book to, so that they could then be sort of a touch point within the organization for the person who was going through the program, which I think made the program more robust because that mentor had the insider,

you know, perspective on the organization, the work that they did, but they also were familiar with the reach concept and the reach terms.

Matthew: Got it. Well, we're running up on time here, but I want to give you the opportunity, if there's any one thing in particular you want to leave the audience with, what that would be.

Dr. Andy: Yeah, I think that stepping outside your comfort zone is something that takes some courage, but it's not rocket science. It really isn't. And hopefully, my book sort of demystifies what the challenges are, and how you can use some, I don't want to say simple, but at least easily understandable tools and frameworks to be able to, you know, hopefully live the life that you want to live, the professional life that you want to live. So, that's what I would say.

Matthew: Okay. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to share your wealth experience with us. It's been extremely insightful. Where can people go to learn more about you, your work, and potentially connect?

Dr. Andy: Yeah. I'm pretty easy to find on the internet, but I guess the best two ways would be, they're on LinkedIn, and, you know, my name's Andy Molinsky. I imagine you'll have the information in whatever you produce based on this interview. And also my website, which is my name, so www.andymolinsky.com.

Matthew: Perfect. Well, thanks again so much for your time.

Dr. Andy: Yeah. And I enjoyed it. Thanks.