



Bonus Interview: Sarah Scala

Deb Elbaum: Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host Deb Elbaum and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone. It's Deb. Today, I have a bonus interview episode. I interview Sarah Scala, the president of Sarah Scala Consulting, who, as part of her offerings, coaches leaders as they're kayaking on salt or fresh water. In our conversation, Sarah and I discuss the power of water on our thinking and being, what actually happens during a kayak coaching session, and whether or not she's ever seen a shark. Enjoy!

Hi Sarah.

Sarah Scala: Hi, Deb.

Deb Elbaum: Let's talk about kayak coaching. How did you come up with the idea to coach people using kayaks, in kayaks?

Sarah Scala: Yeah, that's a great question Deb. So, I've been kayaking since I was eight years old. I grew up paddling on Cape Cod learning how to kayak. I, uh, I went to undergrad and studied adventure recreation, so did a lot of kayaking there and, um, you know, even in graduate school, more paddling and it just kept coming up.

Now I'm not a kayak coach in the sense that I'm going to coach you in kayaking to go to the Olympics. So I'm not an athletic coach by any means at all. And so I, you know, I refer to it as coaching and kayaking. Um, just, I don't want anyone to think, you know, I'm, I'm shooting for the Olympics.

It would be fun, but, but the answer, but the answer is no to that. And so it just, it kept coming up where I would meet people who were kayakers already or had done some kayaking and it just, the timing made sense. And so, you know, I don't, I don't promote it on my website because you know, we're in new England.

We don't know if it's going to rain or hurricane or be windy. And paddling is pretty weather dependent, but it's been really helpful. I get excellent feedback when I've done it with clients, um, on the water. And sometimes it's just, you know, we already have a coaching session scheduled maybe to the end of the week, and I know they're a kayaker and they're comfortable on the water and the weather looks like it would allow it. And so then, then it's brought as an option.

Deb Elbaum: Cool. So when I, when I schedule my kayak coaching session with you, walk me through it. What's going to happen?

Sarah Scala: Well, first thing is we'll have to be watching the weather pretty closely. When I'm in my Boston office, it's typically on the Charles River. When I'm at my Cape Cod home

and office, it's in the ocean. So I don't like to mess around with great white sharks or crazy storms, but, you know, once we've decided this is what we're going to do, Um, and we get, we get to the launch point. You know, we talk, I talk about safety first and foremost, make sure they have the right equipment, the life jacket, um, that they're comfortable sitting in a boat because when we're going to do executive and leadership coaching, anyway, I don't want the paddling to be an inhibitor or to make people uncomfortable.

So I don't. Push it ever, but if it's a right option and the client wants to do it, it's usually pretty excellent. So we talk a lot about safety. Um, I share, you know, if they're fairly new at paddling, I share some quick paddling strokes. I, I taught kayaking for 10 years. Um, when I was, you know, 20 to 30, I lived in the Midwest and I was part of a kayak club and, uh, we would volunteer at the YMCAs to teach kayaking in the swimming pools.

So, um, I'm pretty good at teaching some basic and advanced skills, but the client has a separate boat. They have to know how to swim. They have to wear a life jacket and they have to have paddled before. So there are some definite prerequisites for that. But once we get on the water, it's very similar to your traditional coaching session in the sense that there's a lot of dialogue. There's questions, there's, you know, reflections, things like that.

I find that when people do coaching through or, while kayaking, they seem to be less anxious. It's less formal. They tend to get more creative ideas. And it just seems to be more relaxed. I notice a lot more laughter, which I don't always pick up when I'm coaching CEOs or executives, but it makes you very human.

You can't be, you know, messing around on your iPhone or getting distracted. You really have to be present. So I think it's that sense of presence and that change of pace that that really helps. I mean, biologically, I think, you being a doctor, we both know that movement releases endorphins and increases the heart rate and better oxygen levels. So certainly the person should be feeling pretty good.

Deb Elbaum: Yeah. And I also think about the power of the water. So we know that when we're in different environments, we think different ways and we feel different ways. And I'm curious what people say or what, or how you see the power of the water as contributing to the success of these sessions?

Sarah Scala: Yeah, it's, it's huge. I think it's a huge contributor for sure, whether we're on fresh water or whether we're on salt water, just because you can't have many other distractions except talking and paddling, but there's the whole world happening around you, right? In the, on the Charles River, you know, we're, we're, we're seeing geese and we're seeing, you know, different water fowl and different animals. And then in the ocean, we hope to, gosh, we don't see the great white shark or, you know, we're, we're, we're looking at, you know, uh, little crabs in the water or, or things like that. And I just think connecting with nature and the outdoors is huge in terms of just helping people reduce stress, be present and, um, and be there and be there, there, there really isn't isn't many, aren't really many other locations for coaching that match the experience of being on the water that I've experienced. I mean, I've coached some people on occasion while we're riding our bikes or

we're going for a walk or a hike, and although yes, in nature, it's never quite the same as being on the water.

Deb Elbaum: Yeah. Is there an example of a conversation that you can share with us? Where someone had a big Aha?

Sarah Scala: Yeah. So a few years ago I was kayaking with a good friend, who's also an MD, a medical doctor, and we did a kayak coaching session. She's a very seasoned kayaker and you know, we, we got into it. We started talking she's under a pretty high level of stress being, you know, a medical provider, trying to balance a heavy schedule, keep a, you know, a happy home life with her family, things like that. And by the end of the paddle the client had defined some next steps and some strategies for when she, when we got off the water and she would go back to work and it didn't take very long. You know, it wasn't even like a full hour that led to those next steps or let's try or let's experiment. It was just, you know, casual dialogue. You're pretty relaxed. And she just, you know, really trusts me as her coach to just be honest and say, what's going on? What barriers are in the way, what might be possible? You know, things to think about when she's going through heavily stressful experiences. And that, that was a lot of fun.

Deb Elbaum: Yeah. Wow. Um, And I'm curious about you and how kayak, kayaking and paddling affects you and how you show up as a coach? Because, you know, again, we're people too, and our environment affects us, and I know that I show up differently if I'm sitting in front of my computer or if I'm sitting in another part of my house or if I'm at the beach. So tell me about the insights you have about you.

Sarah Scala: Yeah, great question, Deb. There are some different things happening with me as a coach when I'm kayaking and coaching versus sitting here in my comfortable chair. When I'm kayaking and coaching, I am, I have a dual focus, first and foremost on myself and the client and our physical safety, because we're in nature. There are different risks than being at our home office or at work. And so physical safety and also the psychological safety that I always focus on with anyone that I am coaching. So I slow down my approach. My questions are a little bit slower and I leave more space for reflection. I don't think there's a better place to be able to sit and take a moment, think about life, and think about challenges then when you're sitting in the blue ocean or on a nice river on a beautiful warm day, and so really leaving more time to maximize the presence of the client. And, um, you know, sometimes things come up that may surprise you like waves or a fish, or there's all of a sudden great blue herons on rivers tend to surprise me, like whatever I paddle, there's nothing there and then all of a sudden then, so just to be, you know, paying attention, but being even, even more, more present. I think, you know, having a pace that anticipates these things is needed on the water, but the clients at the end have told me that was amazing. Like, when can we do this again? It's always pretty rewarding.

And again, I don't do this every day, all day because it takes more time. There's, there's more risks. There's a lot of other factors involved, but there have been a number of these cases with clients that it's just the right recipe.

Deb Elbaum: Have you ever seen a shark? You mentioned that a few times. Have you ever encountered,

Sarah Scala: Have I ever encountered a shark? Uh, I think at the, maybe at the aquarium. I try to avoid them. I know on Cape Cod, there's a, there's an app, that's like the great white shark app. So it will alert you. And usually if it's a client, I'm not like way out, way, way out in the water, you know, between Falmouth and Martha's Vineyard, and I'm not paddling through the gut of Woods Hole where there are, you know, shark sightings. But, uh, so I really do try to try to keep it most safe. So yes, I've seen sharks in the aquarium, but not, never during coaching, but definitely, you know, see fish and wildlife and birds, which it's pretty amazing.

Deb Elbaum: Yeah. Um, if people were going to, to ask themselves some coaching questions. So say some people have kayaks and they go kayaking themselves, what, what are your favorite coaching questions to help people start exploring what's really on their mind?

Sarah Scala: Yeah. So I think one, one question I like to ask is: where are you right now? Whether I'm kayaking, kayak coaching, or in person, a lot of times I'm coaching leaders, CEOs, executives, they jump on, they jump in the meeting, we're on Zoom. And so that's a pretty important question regardless where we're at, because although they may physically be in front of me or, or on the phone, or even in person, their mind may be in their past meeting or thinking about what's next on their to do list. And so I find that as a pretty great question to ask, especially in the beginning to help them focus in and be present. I mean, coaching is an investment and I want to make sure that they're really maximizing that opportunity. So that, that is definitely, definitely one of the best coaching questions that I ask. But as we get into the dialogue and the client's like, okay, I need to start doing this or not do this or change this, I often will ask, especially towards the end of coaching, what are you willing to give up in order to make space for this? It's very easy for someone to say, I'm going to do these four or five new things. I'm going to put them on my to-do list. Yup. But you're already, you know, a high performer leader. You can't, you can only fit so much on the plate.

And so helping them to see, okay, big picture. If I am going to do these things, what, what needs to shift? Can I delegate things? Can I allocate my time differently? I really like that question. I think that question comes from Michael Bungay Stanier here and some of his coaching work, but it surprises clients often, and surprise isn't bad. But I think, okay, so I'm going to do these three things, but what, what, what can come off the plate or off the list?

Deb Elbaum: Right. All about simplicity. And I think what a great connection to being on the water and being in the kayak, because it's all about simplicity. You're just, you're just in the moment, like, what do I need to do next? It makes it all so simple. Yeah.

Sarah Scala: Yeah. I completely. I agree.

Deb Elbaum: How do you use, I'm curious, in your coaching questions on the water, do you use questions about the wildlife or about the fish or about the, the waves to bring those into people's lives?

Sarah Scala: Yeah, definitely, especially, especially when it's unanticipated. I can't, I can't schedule the great blue Heron or the spider crab or, you know, the fish to come out. But when they do, we talk about being, maybe what's going on that you're not ready for or not anticipating? And how do you manage yourself? Make sure yourself or your team is safe? Not physically safe so much that because most teams are working in offices, but using it metaphorically is, is very common

for some of the questions that I would bring up, but again, it's, it's improv because it's, we are not at the aquarium. I cannot schedule these things. Oh, it'd be great if I could. And at two o'clock we have the dolphin. No, it just, that just doesn't happen. So helping them to relate to what's going on. But you know, sometimes it's simple questions like what's coming up for you as we, you know, make this turn or, or now go into this harbor? What's coming up for you as you think about work? Or do you think about, you know, your leadership role?

Deb Elbaum: What's on your horizon? That's a good one.

Sarah Scala: Exactly. Exactly. Yeah.

Deb Elbaum: What's your favorite place in the world to kayak?

Sarah Scala: Um, saltwater kayak: I love Cape Cod being a native. Uh, fresh freshwater kayak: there is an amazing Lake in Grafton County of New Hampshire. I think technically it's in Enfield called Grafton Pond. Grafton Pond is amazing because there are no powerboats allowed, so it's only paddling, canoeing and kayaking. And there's about 47 little tiny islands. And there are loons year round, like loons' families, and it's just the most pristine, beautiful, quiet place that, um, that I've paddled. I paddled all over the world, but if I had to pick one that's within a driving distance of a Boston or Cape Cod, Grafton Pond's pretty amazing.

Deb Elbaum: Lovely. Well, you're getting me excited about going to Cape Cod, and we're definitely going to have to do this one day. Um, if other people want to find you online, where can they find you?

Sarah Scala: They can find me at sarahscala.com, SARAHCALA, and the same name on LinkedIn.

Deb Elbaum: Great. Thanks so much, Sarah. I can imagine it. And it's making me smile. Thanks for being with me.

Sarah Scala: Thanks so much, Deb.