



FOCUS on Leadership – presented by FOCUS St. Louis
Episode #1: Where to Start

YEMI AKANDE-BARTSCH: Celebrating 25 years of leadership in the St. Louis region, this is the FOCUS St. Louis Leadership Podcast. I'm Yemi Akande-Bartsch, President and CEO of FOCUS St. Louis and your host. Join me as I talk with great leaders and visionaries inspiring our world to be a better place to live, work and play for all of us. Ready, set, talk.

Today's guest is Rebecca Bennett, Founder and Principal of Emerging Wisdom LLC and its subsidiary InPower Institute. Wisdom is a forward-thinking social enterprise that helps individuals live empowered lives, as well as leaders build impactful organizations. It also works to advance communities to brighter futures. In 2010, Rebecca opened InPower Institute as a center for community healing and optimal living. She has since helped tens of thousands of people and countless organizations affect positive change. Rebecca also serves as the immediate past co-chair of the board for Forward Through Ferguson and is past chair of the board for Generate Health. It is my honor and privilege to welcome the great visionary leader and my friend Rebecca Bennett.

Rebecca, hello and welcome.

REBECCA BENNETT: Hi Yemi. Thank you so much for having me.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Absolutely. It's been a while since I've been wanting to talk deeper leadership conversation with you just to learn about how you got to now. So for our audience members, many of which know you, why don't we start by having you tell us about yourself and your leadership journey.

BENNETT: Hmm... I don't know quite where to begin. I don't know that there's any point at which – a definable point in my life at which I said "I'm a leader now." So when thinking about when does the journey begin, I can how all of the threads of my life experience have prepared me to be in deeper levels of service over time.

But where to begin this journey ... I think because of your leadership with FOCUS St. Louis, it's probably appropriate for me to start this particular story as a Coro Fellow, given that Coro was one of the signature programs for FOCUS for quite some time. But before Coro was with FOCUS, I had an opportunity to be a Coro Fellow, which prepares young, bright college and graduate students and adults for lives in public service. So it is like a residency for people who are interested in public affairs and public policy. I did Coro after I finished graduate school, after I finished a bout with AmeriCorps working in some of our most challenging environments in the

city of Detroit but really being of service and being able to see what poverty among young people and families looks like and what we as institutions and systems can do about it and then I got into Coro. And it really expanded my focus in some pretty profound ways by giving me exposure to lots of aspects of public life that I didn't know anything about before then.

So I think of those things as being foundational parts of my leadership journey, the early sort of formative experiences. Then what happened was I got a chance to work for a consulting firm doing work to advance the public good. Really again my focus in on public policy and community transformation. In that context though, I got a chance to be civically engaged. I think this is something we often don't focus on so much when we think about leadership, it's more about positional authority and less about the ways in which we can make our communities better. But I think anybody who is a halfway decent leader takes seriously the opportunity to be of service to their community. So as a young professional, folks said "Hey, do you want to sit on this board?" or "Hey, do you want to volunteer for this event?" And that got me some really great leadership experiences as well.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: And you said yes.

BENNETT: I said yes. I said yes to sitting on the board of an adoption agency because I had two of what I would call my little sisters, technically they're my cousins, get adopted. So when I was asked to sit on the region's only black foster care and adoption agency I did. I didn't know anything about the foster care and adoption process, but I said yes. And that gave me an opportunity to eventually chair that board. Then I got asked to sit on the board of the Professional Organization of Women, which prepares African-American women to learn, lead and succeed, specifically in corporate as well as nonprofit spaces. Thinking of the corporate spaces as the last frontier for equity, for many of us. And I said yes, even though I worked for a company but it wasn't quite corporate because our focus was the public good. So again, not necessarily aligning with my immediate experience but an opportunity to serve to make sure that the advantages of a just society inured to all. And when they asked me to chair, I said yes. And then I got asked to serve to help found a charter school, and this is interesting because I'm a public school kid, but as I think about the importance of options it led me to go, "Hey, let's lean into this and see and explore and that's when I really got to learn about the tradeoffs and the challenges that come with having equitable excellent education. Public school education, charter school education, independent school education. When I was asked to chair, I said yes. So all these opportunities over time really helped to develop me. None of that is positional – at some point I did get into positional leadership but the opportunities to be of service preceded authority - institutional or organizational authority – and quite honestly have kept me grounded.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Wow, that is profound what you just shared, because those are the signposts that brought you to today. I'm remembering some of the questions I've gotten along the way from many of our alums or just folks in community that say, "Ok, I'm ready to serve – where do I start?" What advice would you give to them? You've sort of found yourself in places

where you've been asked but not everyone is at that table or even at that door. Where can people proceed to even being asked?

BENNETT: You know, I think one of the best things is to start where you're planted, bloom where you're planted. Take a look around, what is it that you're most passionate about, what are the purposes that really guide and inform your life and your work. I think that those are good compasses for discerning what are possible opportunities and where you might be most beneficial, most helpful, most useful. I also think that it's important for us when we're thinking about serving to really think about what are we most interested in and where do we wish that we had some of the supports, some of the resources, and can you help close those gaps now. So we can look at our own history and experiences for opportunities to serve, we can look at our communities and what's immediately around us. You know, I say bloom where we're planted. We can also take an inventory of our purposes. I speak about purpose in the plural because I don't think, I think we're multidimensional beings, and I don't think we have a single purpose all the time, we have multiple purposes and where do those purposes lead us in terms of opportunities.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: It's probably just a matter of prioritizing what those purposes are.

BENNETT: Yeah, and it's going to change over time. Which means then that the way I might serve at 50 is not necessarily the way I served at 18. And the opportunities aren't necessarily as interesting to me. You know, what I was passionate about as a younger woman and what I'm passionate about now as a middle-aged woman. For some of those things there's a through line and they're consistent but other things have evolved as I've evolved. As I've become a parent, as I've moved in community spaces, I've had more life experiences and seen the devastation that can be wrought among our community members as a result of how systems behave or how institutions behave. As I am seasoning, getting seasoned and more developed, my constellation of interests are happening to change.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: So what keeps you here in St. Louis?

BENNETT: The people.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Can you think of specific examples of individuals that have helped shape your journey and your immersion into the region?

BENNETT: Sure. I started out meeting one of the trainers in Coro whose name is Jessica Perkins and she and a colleague of hers Lurna Godwin were starting their very own consulting firm. It was focused on the public good. How do we maximize public participation in public policy processes and decisions so that the public has ample opportunity to make decisions about what is best for its health and well-being, in transportation, in environmental remediation, in community development, in education, in housing, in you name it. Let's make sure the public has a seat at the table. Because of my Coro connections, I met Jessica in Coro, I got to do a

rotation with Vector, I ended up becoming their very first employee when they decided to open their firm.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: I did not know that.

BENNETT: Yes. So I say that I had a chance – and I worked for that firm for 15 years so I had a chance to do absolutely everything in the context of that business. But I had two wonderful mentors in the form of Jessica Perkins and Lurna Godwin. I don't think we can ever underestimate the power of relationship to attract and keep quality talent. Because my intention was to only be here for a year – the year that I was in Coro. I'm from DC, so you know, the Midwest was what you flew over to get to the coast for as far as I was concerned. But these relationships and all of the people I got a chance to meet through Coro and then got a chance to meet through my networks. The other thing is, I found some of the most creative people in the world here. Now I think a lot of people in St. Louis undervalue this region, for a variety of reasons, but do. I don't think St. Louis is necessarily associated with being the most creative center of the world.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Not yet, but after this interview possibly...

BENNETT: But, I had met, I think it's the Midwest sensibility, if you want something done, you do it yourself. I've met so many people who've looked at public challenges and traumas and situations and have decided that they would create the solutions they wanted to see.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: And this is a place with which they could do that.

BENNETT: That's right. Because St. Louis was small enough, they had enough ability to access or had enough relationship to use or they had enough of a platform to attract attention and support that they just got started, they got out there and they got started. I saw that in a variety of domains and fields, and that really attracted me here, made me think about this space not as a sort of backwards place but as a place that was supportive of new ideas and that could be a great place to stake a claim in really making a change. Some settings are too big for anything that you do to be of any significant consequence unless you have massive amounts of resources, but that's not the case here. The intimate nature of this community means that concerted efforts can make a big difference. And there are lots of people here who are generative, who are creative, who are sourcing the solutions they want to see in the world. And that got me here, got me to stay here.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Well that's powerful. I think we should put this out there and let people use it as a way to draw more people into our region. You've hit the nail on the head in terms of that the smallness and the relationship building and you're able to create deep relationships here in ways that I have not been able to do in other cities that I've lived. Similar to you, that's why I call St. Louis home. And every time I go out, I say I cannot wait to get back home and people ask me, "So tell me about your home. What does it look like?" And I paint this picture and they're like, "Wow, that sounds like paradise." And I say, "Well, I didn't go that far." But nonetheless, it

is a place where we can all do good. So you've mentioned a number of issues that we have in this region, and depending on who you talk to, some people may say, "It's so overwhelming, I don't know where to start." What do you say to those types of individuals?

BENNETT: So I want to answer both questions. I want to answer the question you asked me a moment ago, again, just in a different way, and I want to answer this question about how it's so overwhelming. So I understand why people are overwhelmed by the depth of challenge that lives here in St. Louis. There's great opportunity and extraordinary talent and there are some real calcified issues here that have been baked hard into the earth of this space. That's part of what brings me here. When I start thinking about what attracts me to this region, my mother always said I liked things that are hard and difficult.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: She was right!

BENNETT: You can't understand St. Louis without understanding its position and why its position matters. St. Louis is literally the crossroads for our country. So anybody who is in the transportation business knows that we are a major node for moving north, south, east and west. And it turns out that our location, north, south, east west, right at the crossroads of America, of America's promise and of America's nightmare, is what makes this such a potent and rich place to be. And such a compelling place to be. That Mason-Dixon line was real. We're right on the cusp of North and South. All of the battles and challenges around race and entrenched white supremacy, racial caste systems, we're right at the center of the battle between industrialized American and rural or agricultural America. We're right there in the thick of that economic tension and we're right there at the doorway to the west, between East and West, the density of the East, the sort of wild nature of the West. All of the sort of defining forces of America conspire and connect right here in St. Louis. And I tend to believe that if what we want to do is support the evolution of our society that the kinds of changes we want to see made, have to happen not just on the margins of our polity, not just on the West Coast or East Coast, but they have to happen through the heart. Any organism that is evolving, that is changing, it has to go through the heart because the heart is what circulates everything. So changes on the extremities, while necessary, are not sufficient to advance the growth and development of the organism.

The same thing is true for our societies. The best of what America can be, it will never be if we cannot see it grow and change in the heart of the matter, which is right here. The heart, though, is what takes a beating. The fact that all these forces, whether or not it is the tension around racial class or economic caste or it is the tension around agricultural and industrial and post-industrial, or it's the tension between east and west, dense and open. All of those things are compacted here. And that is part of what sets up this, "I don't know where to start?" Because the aggregation of all those things, the accumulation of hurts, of national traumas, is thick here, is noticeable and pronounced. So, I don't know where to start, I don't know what to do, my oh my, it's too much. So I'm just giving some of the framing for why I might feel like it's too much.

That stated, challenge, oppression, difficulty have never been a match for fully creative human beings. Ever. Pick a culture, pick a society, pick an era – there have always been people who have sought to find a way through, over, under, around whatever the obstacle, restriction or constraint would be. With varying degrees of success, but there have always been people who tried. So what I tend to believe is yes, I'm afraid things might not get better, but I hope beyond my fear and then I work beyond my hope. And if I do that, that gives us the best shot, because I'm not incapacitated by the fact that I see this is difficult. The other thing that needs to happen is that not only do I need to hope and I need to work in the midst of my fears, not in the absence of fear, because I think that's mythological. I think we encounter these difficult things and I think our knees should knock.

But I think the other thing that makes it possible is a really strong sense of community because there's a saying, "Life doesn't give you more than you can handle," and I like to say that's B.S. It's B.S. The only way that's true is if the second you is plural. Life doesn't give you – singular – more than you – plural – can handle. And so when we come together, in community, in strong relationship, we tend to be able to pick away at that which would disable us or restrict us. Little by little by little by little. But we do so as a collective. Because certainly these things can be far too great for a single mind. But they are not far too great for connected hands, connected minds, open and courageous hearts.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Love it. I think I'm going to get each one of our alums a t-shirt that says Open and Courageous Minds. I love how you've framed this and pulled it all together in terms of the heart, the community, the collaboration. I borrow that term from you all the time and people go, "Wow, that's new," and I go "It's Rebecca Bennett, what else do you think." But it shows what's possible when humans come together for the greater good of their community.

BENNETT: Yes, we're a creative species. I mean, that's what defines us as a species – we make stuff. And we make stuff happen. And so much of what we've made happen that's maladaptive and painful and ugly and destructive, we can unmake.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: That's true.

BENNETT: Right, the emphasis on the we. We can unmake. And it might not happen in a single lifetime, but as someone with kids, my focus is not on a single lifetime. I don't just want my life in my lifetime to be better, I want my kids. How we hold our children is how we hold our future.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: It's for future generations.

BENNETT: Absolutely. And I want their children and their children and their children, which brings us back to some indigenous wisdom that says good leaders are thinking about seven generations ahead. They're planning for the long view, they're taking the long view on what the impacts and implications of their decisions and their efforts are. That's not just our indigenous wisdom of first-nation peoples here in the United States but as I think about authors like, wonderful African authors like Ayi Kwei Armah, who talk about the healers and the 500-year

perspective. Leaders needing a 500-year perspective, are you kidding me? If we had a 500-year perspective, what would we do differently?

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Oh, tons of things.

BENNETT: Absolutely. So much of the mess we're in is because we're myopic and we're only looking at what is possible in the immediate or what we need in the immediate without some sense of what the impacts and implications are beyond the immediate term. So we need leaders with the long view for sure.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: I couldn't agree more. So Rebecca, what are you most proud of?

BENNETT: I would say my people. I'm most proud of my people. I have done some really meaningful work in this life and in this community and I think I'm only getting started. But I'm most proud of cultivating a lineage of changemakers. I invest a lot in people, in my teams, in the communities I'm a part of. I don't think it's sufficient to be a single bright light – my aim is not to be the brightest bulb in the bunch. My aim is to create a field of enlightenment.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: I like that.

BENNETT: I want to help cultivate lots of bright lights. And as I look at the women and men I've had a chance to nurture, support in their growth and development, as I look at my children, who I am intentional about parenting, you know, I think that's it. My mom used to say to me, "It's our job to train up our replacements on the battlefield." And she said, "You know, I've done my job." She wasn't saying I did my job, she was saying she did her job. I think that's part of my life philosophy. I didn't know it at the time, but I think so now. I plant seeds, and these seeds are people I water them as best I can. I want them to be better, stronger, healthier, wiser, more intelligent, more insightful, more compassionate than I ever could be. And I think that gives us the best shot, at a better life and a better world.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: I like that. You're not looking to create a carbon copy of you.

BENNETT: No.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: You're creating individuals. You're mentoring individuals.

BENNETT: Yes, and people who are better than me. That means, so often we think about leaders as sort of being jealous, we ascribe a set of characteristics of leaders as jealous or envious people who want to be the ones who do all of the shining and who don't want to share spotlight or who resent other peoples' development. But if you have a 500-year view, there's no way that any single person could be sufficient unto that view. A single heroic human will not save our species.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: That's true.

BENNETT: Will not. What will save our species and help support and sustain life on this planet will be a critical mass of active, engaged, thought-provoked, enlightened, committed humans. That's what it takes – that's what it takes. So I think I'm most proud of helping to build up that critical mass in my own little way.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: In your own big way, I will add to that. So do you have any aspects of your life that looking back you would say, "Hmm, I wish I had a do-over"? And what would that be?

BENNETT: No. And that's not because I haven't made my fair share of mistakes and it's not because everything's been perfect, but I think the mistakes I've made and the challenges I've lived through have helped to form the consciousness that I contain, that I have today. I've needed it all – I've needed the success and the failures, I've needed my character flaws, I've needed the people who've helped me see my blind spots. I've needed the achievements so that I could experience my own agency, my own power. I've needed some of the humiliations so that I could experience the fact that I'm still a work in progress. I've needed and made use of everything this life has sent me, pretty and painful.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: I like how you've phrased that. That it's all part of life lessons, it's all part of leadership lessons, and one is not a throwaway as it makes you stronger.

BENNETT: Yeah, it does, you know. I think I have learned more from the places where I've fallen down than I have from – it's not that I haven't learned from the places where I've thrived – but from the spaces where I've been hurt and I don't mean where someone hurt me but where I've hurt others. Where I have not lived fully into my ideals or my principles. Those spaces taught me a lot about me and so I wouldn't change that.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Not surprising. I'm truly amazed by you Rebeccah and I want to thank you for everything you do for our region and beyond. And in our final moments together, I'd like for you to share with our audience what's next for you and any sparks of wisdom we should be keeping in the backs of our minds as we move about our days.

BENNETT: I spent the first 25 years of my career focused on policy, every sort of public policy there was, and I like to say with varying degrees of effectiveness. We won some, we lost a lot more, in terms of seeing our efforts result in real systemic change. It takes a lot to change systems. It take a lot – remember that long view. So my job is to dig the dirt and then somebody else plants the seed and somebody else waters the seed in their lifetime and someone else harvests them and the other person pulls the weeds. Like I have to look at that in terms of my sort of incremental contribution. I spend a lot of time focused on that.

At this stage of my life, I am ready to help co-create the healed future. Dismantling the artifacts of maladaptive systems, systems that don't work, that are dysfunctional, I will leave that now to the next generation on the battlefield. It's not that it doesn't matter or that it's not important. It is, but I've done that to the best of my ability and my job right now is to help co-create the healed future that I want my great-great-great-great-great-great grandchildren to live in. That

requires a different set of faculties and a different set of capacities and invites me to be creative in ways that I could not imagine before. Where I'm not limited to and only working with what currently exists but where I'm radically imaginative about what can be and I'm supporting others in bringing their visions to the forefront. So I am supporting people in bringing their social innovations and ideas to the world and in resourcing that. And I'm committed to healing our communities, and I call it community healing, where we seek not only to transform the conditions of our society which people who are engaged in policy action are often trying to do, but we seek to transform the core of the human experience, our consciousness. What is at our center, our internal lives, that might be painful. Because here's what I know. Transformed people transform systems.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: That is true.

BENNETT: You don't change systems if we ourselves don't show up differently. And what does that take? So I'm interested in that work – transforming consciousness and transforming conditions. And I think the best way to do that is to focus on healing. Because if we don't heal it – whatever it is – if we don't heal racism, sexism, homophobia, the ways we look at which our brothers and sisters who have varying levels of ability, if we don't heal our social caste systems, if we don't heal it, we'll spread it. Period. We cannot pretend that somehow this stuff will spontaneously dissolve. It won't, so we have to heal it. That means, not just healing it in the aggregate, "Oh, I want a better society." But healing it in the personal. The personal is planetary. The extent to which I'm harboring or behaving in ways that reinforce those systems, the extent to which I've internalized that and made it mean something about me, the extent to which I'm acting with bias in ways that undermine other people's lives, the extent to which that's happening – that's the world I'm investing in and creating. So I need to heal that, so that I don't create that world with my choices and with my actions. The rest of my life is devoted to community healing because I think that gives us our best shot at creating the healed future.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Hmm, I agree. You know I can appreciate the fact that you had realized that you had come to a certain point to pivot to another set of goals and priorities that you can really move forward and continue to grow leaders, continue to mentor leaders across different sectors. And I love that. Because some folks think a career is for a lifetime. Like yes, I'm doing this and it's for a lifetime. But it doesn't have to be for a lifetime. When your work is done, your work is done. And you will know.

BENNETT: Indeed. Yemi, you've got it. I'm doing my best.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Absolutely. This has been a wonderful conversation. Every time I see you it's like a cup of caffeine that I get from your words, of moving the region forward with the leaders that we have in the various sectors.

BENNETT: We can do it.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Yes, absolutely. I'm convinced we can. And I'm the type of person that I always see the glass half full. And so I want to thank you Rebecca Bennett for sharing your time with us today.

BENNETT: Thank you.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: And I also want to thank our listeners for joining us on the FOCUS St. Louis leadership podcast.