



Podcast

## Creating a level playing field for collaboration

Tonnie van der Zouwen

### # 14 Siddharth GJ – The essence of collaboration beyond disabilities

#### Keywords

collaboration, disability, self-awareness, leadership, motivation, personal growth, professional development, inclusion, communication



#### Episode description

In this episode, we welcome Siddharth, a senior banker from Bengaluru, India, with over 20 years of experience in the banking industry. Siddharth shares his inspiring journey of living with cerebral palsy, a condition that affects his coordination, and how he has overcome numerous challenges to achieve success. He holds multiple master's degrees and has authored a book titled "Simply Being Sidd." Siddharth is also a motivational speaker who loves discussing topics like leadership, management, and self-awareness. He shares stories of how his childhood experiences have made him mentally stronger and how he has learned to take control of situations without worrying about others' perceptions of his condition. Siddharth highlights that effective collaboration requires a two-way process towards a common goal. He also talks about the importance of building personal relationships before starting any collaborative project. He shares his strategies for connecting with colleagues, especially those who may have different perceptions about disability. Siddharth's advice for facilitators, leaders, and researchers is to take the time to get to know each other and build relationships before expecting collaboration. He emphasises that understanding each other as whole human beings, beyond any disabilities or differences, is crucial for effective collaboration. Tune in to hear Siddharth's valuable insights on leadership, collaboration, and the importance of personal connections in creating an inclusive and productive work environment.

#### Chapters

- 00:00 Introduction to Siddharth
- 03:02 Childhood Experiences and Collaboration
- 07:13 The Importance of Getting to Know Each Other
- 13:46 Overcoming Perceptions of Disability
- 21:42 The Essence of Collaboration Beyond Disabilities



## Transcript

Italic words are spoken by Tonnie.

### Introduction to Siddharth

***In this episode, we welcome Siddharth. Siddharth is a senior banker based in India. Very welcome, Siddharth. Can you introduce yourself a bit more?***

Yeah, so I am a banker with more than 20 years of experience I live in Bangaluru, India and I'm a person with cerebral palsy, which actually affects my coordination between my mind and my body. So, I was born normally, but a few days after birth, I had jaundice And because of jaundice, I was not treated well because I was born in a village. And then it happened like that. So I have been a person with CP for the last 45 years. And I have battled a lot of ups and downs in the society. I hold my Master's In Education, I hold my Master's in Economics. And then I went on to get my job. I work in a bank. And apart from banking, I authored my own book. My book name is 'Simply being Sidd'. And I'm a speaker, a very, very fast-paced speaker. I love to talk about motivation, leadership, management, and more importantly, self-awareness. So these are my topics that I love talking about. Apart from that, personally, I am a father of a kid. A son like 12 years old. yeah, this is all about me.

### Childhood Experiences and Collaboration

***Thank you very much. This podcast is about creating a level playing field for collaboration. And I'm anxious to know what your experience is. Maybe tell some stories about when you were invited to participate in a project. What happened? What worked for you? How did you feel?***

The first was in my childhood. This is just an example that I'm giving you, so that you understand the meaning of creating a level field for collaboration, So, to look at the example of what happened in my childhood, I like playing cricket. And I'm mad about cricket. But because of my condition, I was not able to catch the ball because my hand was not allowing me to catch the ball. Okay. So it means that I couldn't get the other person out very easily. Does that mean the other person will go on batting and batting and batting. No. So what happened there? We decided that because I could not catch the ball, okay, if the ball hits my palm, the other person is out. Okay, with me, I have to make sure the ball hits my palm. Only my palm, not even my fingers. And the person is out.

***And how did that work for you?*** It worked beautifully, right? By allowing the ball to hit my palm, rather than going and bowling and bowling and bowling. Right? So, yeah. So with this example, in my professional experience of 20 years in banking, never try to compare myself with somebody. You know, only when you are comparing yourself to



somebody or only when you are competing with somebody, this problem of level field comes into the picture. But what if I don't compete? What if I'm competing only with myself? I think the entire scenario changes for the better. Because you are the boss, you know what is happening around you, you know how to navigate the situation, you know how to involve people. Whether people want to involve you or not is not my problem. But I know how to involve the people. How do I do that? I will do that at a very, very personal level. First, I try to connect with the person personally. I try to understand something more about the person. Whether the person is happy to interact with me, whether the person has any issues to talk to me.

So I'm a very different guy. Because of my childhood experience, I became more stronger mentally. I should not bother about how people think about me. Instead, I always enjoyed taking control of the situation. Get what I want from the situation. Right? so I have no complaints in life, no complaints in meeting, no complaints anywhere, but rather I have adapted myself very well to the situation.

So, you know, in my experience, collaboration happens if it is a two-way process. It is a two-way process towards a common goal. But even if one person in that particular environment is not responsive or if one person is not going towards the common goal, then collaboration can never happen. It will be either you are using your authority to make things done, which means you are influencing other people to do what you want to do. Or the second thing is you are just doing it for the sake of doing it.

## **Overcoming Perceptions of Disability**

***I expect in your professional life you meet people who maybe are a little bit surprised or even scared to work with you. Does that happen?***

A lot of times it happened. But then I did not bother about that. Because I was focused more on the goal. I was more focused on the task in hand. And I learned how to get the task done. As a leader, I learned two things. Okay? One. I am not really influenced by external factors. I never allow any external factors to influence my thought process. Right? This This means basically I usually understand that I have to be myself, I have to be myself and I have to focus myself on the goal. So when you're having a meeting or something, some people don't respond well. Some people may not even respond the way you want them to respond. Or some people will never even open their mouth. So in those cases, you have to make them do it. How do you make them do it? Suppose I know that Tonnie is not opening the mouth, I will go talk to her, I will ask her, any problems Tonnie? Why are you not participating in the meeting? Why are you not acting in the meeting? So I will try to understand that person. And then I tell her, Tonnie, You need understand that I need your support and I'm depending on you to get the work done. So please be more proactive, participate in the meeting. So you know, people always deserve a second chance. Okay? And you have to give them a second chance. So this is what I will do. I'm even after giving a couple of chances. If that person does not change, then I have to use my authority. How do you do that using your authority? I will



have one more conversation with the person. And I'll tell you, I'll tell the person, well, I have given a lot of chances and you have not come out of the zone. So I'm very sorry to tell you that this might affect your appraisal. You give them a warning. First warning, second warning, and third warning. And after that also, if it doesn't work, then take a more strong action.

***As a banker in your professional life, when you have a collaboration project, you need each other to work on a common goal, like you said, a common task. How do you invite people to come and work with you?***

I don't need to invite people. I don't believe in inviting people to work with me. I believe in making people feel comfortable with me first and then work together. So you need to do it. You build the relationship first and then you start working together. You will do a lot of team bonding activities. get to know people better and then get the job done. So it's not very difficult. But yes, in my case, what is happening is the challenge becomes more higher, or the problem becomes more bigger. Because people have different perceptions about disability. Point one. Point two is, because they have different perceptions, I may not get the response I need. Some people may think, this guy is disabled. How can he do the job? So that's what I told you, give people enough time to get to know you better. And I am very good at that. Even if people don't talk to me, I'll go and talk to them.

***Okay. So you go, you talk to people, you make them feel comfortable with you, and then we can work together.***

So this is what I did in my life. ***And when I think of it, what triggered me, you said, to make a personal relationship. I think everyone is different. So in fact, you said, OK, for you, the challenges are a bit bigger, a bit higher. To really build a personal relationship, you have to be open to the other person. So that goes for everybody. Only for people with a disability it might be different, people have a different perspective on it. They see someone with a disability and not the person. So what's your experience?***

Yeah, yeah, I have seen it. So what I have realized by experiences, once people get to know me, once people start feeling good about me, I think there is no looking back. It becomes a completely easier road ahead.

***And what's your advice? I'm a facilitator and I'm also in research projects. We want to do with people from different perspectives, different backgrounds, different capabilities. And what I noticed that often people are invited, but not in the way that there's enough time and space to getting to know each other. Like you said. Did that happen to you sometimes?***

It happened to me a lot of times. But what is more important for me whether you feel invited or not is up to you to feel. But we are to really understand that we are all professionals who are paid by the company for our job done. whether you want the team invited or not invited is completely up to the individual. But the other person who is a professional and who knows that they are being paid to get the job, I think they will contribute actively whether they are invited or not invited. It's more about attitude



towards the job, attitude towards people. We are not small children, where we have to keep telling you what to do, what not to do. We are all adults, mature enough to understand the particular environment. But yet on the other hand, If you are not comfortable in a particular meeting, I think you need to speak up for yourself. Nobody can speak up for you, So we have to speak up for ourselves. you need to go and tell your manager, sorry, I was not comfortable, but so and so can help me. That will make the situation easier.

***If I understand it right, you say you have to speak up for yourself. That's also mutuality, it's responsibility. But then again, as a leader of a meeting or as a manager, maybe you could also ask, what do you need to feel comfortable? Does that happen in your experience that people ask, okay, what do you need?***

That's exactly what I am saying. Because today when I'm not comfortable with something, I go and speak up for myself. I keep, in my business informed that I'm not comfortable in this specific area. Please see how you can help me out. How will I know what is your problem until you speak up? I am not a magician, to know what is going on in your mind. Yes, there are times when people hesitate to talk. There are times when people don't feel comfortable to even speak up for themselves. In that scenario, the manager will be available and will be aware that this person is not feeling comfortable then what do I do as a manager I go and talk to the person and ask any problems any issues and then that will give the other person the comfort to open up.

## **The Importance of Getting to Know Each Other**

***You take the time to listen and to ask again. It's all part of leadership. You're talking about your professional life. In my practice, we often invite people to work on an issue, not in an organization, but from several organizations. What I take from your message is that when you invite people, even in that situation, you have to take time to build a relationship.***

Exactly. Before you even start a conference or research project, take time to get to know each other. And more importantly, to get to know each other, it really matters that we create opportunities to get to know each other.

***In your work, in your regular work, it's easy to talk to a person, is there a problem or not, and when you invite them to a meeting, you have your roles. But I'm, for instance, organizing conference meetings where we invite people to share, or to create something. Then we need people from all type of capacities, from different levels, from different backgrounds. And then for me, it's often difficult to invite people in the right way. So that's how I started with this podcast, how to create a level playing field for everyone to speak up or to co-create or participate and use whatever capacities they have. So that's a little bit different situation than in a regular job. That's also, I think, getting to know each other. So I'm wondering, and maybe you have some ideas on how to create that space for getting to know each other better before you start working on a task.***



You are doing what you are doing which is all the best. So when you are inviting people for a conference, there might be the challenge that the person may not join the conference, due to whatever reason. Okay? Now, the rule says, everyone must attend this conference. Then everybody will join the conference. If you give them an option that you may join the conference, then people will think, right, so I have a choice. I think I can skip the conference. So basically it is about this subject of the conference, point 1. Point 2, it depends on the urgency of the conference. Point 3, whether you want everybody to be in the conference or you may want only some people to be at the conference. So everything is with you, right? Everything is with you and how you communicate. Yeah. And maybe like we are doing now, just have a Zoom meeting and talk to each other and what do you need to come or to work there. Again, I'm telling you, we can never expect 100 % level field for collaboration.

**There are always power differences too. Some people have more influence than others.** Yeah, this is what I have learnt, and this is what I'm doing, and this is what I will continue to do.

## **The Essence of Collaboration Beyond Disabilities**

### ***So is there anything else you would like to share***

Yes, I would like to add something. In collaboration, whether you are disabled or not disabled, it doesn't matter. What matters is the person, the person's experience and the person's willingness to contribute. If you have these three qualities, collaboration can happen. But unfortunately, people don't realize that and they happen to get a backlog about disabilities. They think too much about disabilities, that can actually hamper collaboration.

***And I notice it's like you said, you have to get to know someone a little bit better and then you see just another person and not someone with a disability or with blonde hair or white or black skin or whatever. Doesn't matter.***

How does it matter? Yeah, so, but you have to get used to each other a little bit.

***What I learnt from your stories is that facilitators, leaders, and researchers have to take time to get to know each other so they can see the other person as a whole human being and not someone with disabilities or with a specific colour or with a specific background or whatever.***

Yeah, that's really matters.

**And then still I noticed, especially in the Western world, we send out an email and then we expect people to collaborate. Yeah. And if they don't show up, we are mad, if they don't participate, we are surprised. Why don't they participate? And then after the meeting, when nothing happens, we are surprised that nothing happens. Why don't they take responsibility? And then people wonder how come.**

All of us are responsible for our own action. And there is no use of blaming somebody else for your own situation.





***So thank you very much, Siddharth.***

I have said all I wanted to talk. ***Okay. And I thank you very much.***

## **More info**

[Siddharth on LinkedIn](#)

[Simply being Sidd!](#) My fight with life and God, book (2017)

[Am I normal?: Siddharth GJ at TEDxEMWS](#) 11 min. video

[CavinKare Ability Mastery Award 2021](#), 2 min. video on Siddharth mission

[TEDxGateway- Siddarth GJ-](#) Love yourself and Life will follow its own Path