

Episode #: 08

Episode Title: Finding clarity through doubt with Jenny Williams

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Intro

Louise Everett (00:11)

Welcome to ClarityMatters – the podcast where we cut through noise and complexity to help leaders think, communicate and lead clearly. If we're honest, most of us experience doubt quite regularly. We question our decisions, wonder whether we're seeing the full picture, or feel uncertain about the best way forward. And yet in leadership, doubt is often treated as something to hide. Clear leadership is usually associated with confidence, decisiveness, and certainty. We expect leaders to have the answers and show the way forward with clarity. My guest today argues that this assumption may actually be holding leaders back. Jenny Williams is an executive coach and the author of the newly released *Brilliant Doubt*, a book that challenges the idea that strong leaders must always appear certain.

Instead, she suggests that doubt — when we understand it and work with it well — can sharpen our thinking, improve our decisions and ultimately help us lead with greater clarity. In her work with senior leaders, Jenny explores the different ways doubt shows up — from self-doubt to situational and systemic uncertainty — and how learning to engage with those doubts can strengthen leadership rather than weaken it. Jenny describes doubt as “the grit in the oyster — essential for creation”, which I love because it reminds us that the discomfort leaders feel when they're uncertain can actually be the starting point for better thinking and better decisions. So today, we're going to explore a fascinating paradox: how doubt — something leaders are often taught to suppress — might actually be the key to clearer thinking and better decisions.

Jenny, welcome to the ClarityMatters podcast.

Jenny (01:58)

Thank you for having me. It's brilliant to be here, Louise.

Main conversation

Louise Everett (02:01)

We actually met almost ten years ago when you were my executive coach. Our work together guided me through a deep phase of professional doubt — coming from all three of the sources that you highlight in the book. Your work explores how leaders think and make decisions in complex environments, so I'm really looking forward to the perspective that you'll bring to our conversation today. So let me start there. We often equate leadership with being decisive and certain. In *Brilliant Doubt*, you challenge that. How can doubt actually become a pathway to clearer thinking and better decisions, rather than a sign of weak leadership?

Jenny (02:50)

I think doubt is critical for clearer thinking and better decisions. So that's my start point with that. And I think part of the issue is our relationship with doubt. You know, we're all so familiar with that kind of doubt to where we're overthinking, that swirling procrastination and sort of stuck phase. And that's what gives doubt a bad reputation. And actually, when you start to unpack it and actually look at the role of doubt and also the way that other disciplines use doubts, then you can start to see the intelligence that it can bring to leadership. So, one of the things that I talk about in my book is, I look at science, for example, and doubt goes hand in hand with science. It's one of the ways that they make the breakthroughs. If you think about things like peer review studies, essentially they're doubt review studies. You know, you're inviting your peers to doubt your work in a really constructive and helpful way, which gets to better thinking ultimately, and clearer thinking.

So a number of disciplines actually use doubt really well. You know, in coaching we use doubt. You know, we have supervision where we actually doubt our work. And we look at what's going on there, but we don't talk about doubt in terms of leadership. And yet we know it goes hand in hand with leadership. And I think it's in part because of what I talked about, this fact that actually we're so familiar with the bad side of doubt. And actually what we need to start talking about is this other side of doubt. And this is what I call active doubt. And so, if you think that the other side is inactive doubt, where we're swirling and we're overthinking and we're not going anywhere. And actually, when we learn to use doubt actively and constructively, that's what gets us to clearer thinking and better decisions.

And so for me, active doubt is a process. And it's about bringing doubt to the table, asking what it's got to say and to tell us, and then working and engaging with it constructively, rather than pushing it to the side, so that it can help you to get to that clarity and that decision making. And one of the things I talk about is, you know, all change starts with a doubt. So if you are not up for change, you're not up for progressing. Then, you know, you're not going to have a relationship with doubt. But if you accept that doubt is part of change, actually that starts to give it a seat at the table and it starts to give us a role in terms of leadership conversations. And so for me, it's about how do we reframe it and then use it constructively in a leadership context. Because when you do that, actually it gets you to a really good place.

Louise Everett (06:08)

This idea of reframing it is so critical when it comes to doubt. When you go through life thinking that doubt is a negative, it's a weakness, it's an uncertainty, I'm not sure, therefore it's weak. But how you're explaining it here is actually the opposite of that, entirely.

Jenny (06:31)

Completely - because it brings with it creativity. You know, if you just look at it through the lens of creativity and curiosity. If you are unsure about something, then you start to get into that possibility space, that what if space. You're not saying, actually I know where we're going with this. You're starting to open up your thinking because of doubts and you say, okay, I'm not sure about that, but what if, let's look at that further. Let's unpack that. So it brings with it, you know, this quality of curiosity and creativity. And if you think about the complexity that leaders are facing at the moment, we need more creativity. We need more curiosity because we're in such uncharted waters. And that's the paradox of leadership today actually, is we've got greater uncertainty than ever before. And actually, that means that we need to lead with more doubt rather than certainty.

Louise Everett (07:39)

Fascinating, isn't it? This, and that leading with doubt is all about, as you've said, surfacing this, bringing the awareness, bringing the attention to it and really focusing on it.

Jenny (07:52)

It is absolutely, and I want to be really clear. I'm not saying it's just doubt - it's about active doubt, and active doubt is the process to get to clarity and decision making. If you don't make it active, then you just swirl and that's no good to anybody.

Louise Everett (08:09)

And that leads me to one idea from your book. Look Jenny, I'm a good student, I have it right here. It's one idea from the book that really stayed with me, is when you talk about the do in doubt, and the idea that doubt shouldn't just sit there ignored - exactly what you're mentioning - it should prompt us to do something with it, to engage with the feeling of doubt. We're recording this chat in March, while I'm training for the London Marathon. As the miles get longer, doubt is heavily creeping in.

Jenny (08:50)

I've been there. That's true.

Louise Everett (08:51)

You've been there four times. I'm in awe. So I'm trying to focus on the do, you know, keep training, adjust what I need to adjust and take the next step. Can you tell us a bit more about that? You've mentioned active doubt, but just anything else about that do part of doubt.

Jenny (09:14)

Yes. And I think you hit the nail on the head with the running metaphor as such. And the one thing I would say about your running is, I firmly believe that if you do the training and you follow the process of it, you get round. And anybody and everyone can get round, and you will get round, Louise, you will. But in terms of doubt, it is this idea of: it's a process. And so it's about saying actually what's the process that we need to follow? And in the book I talk about self as you've said, self-doubt, situational doubt and systemic doubt. There are different processes that you will follow depending on how you're working with those different types of doubts.

And so if you take the self-doubt, one of the aspects that I talk about is actually flow, which is interesting when you think about the parallels with running, because you're wanting to get into flow with running. And actually, the first part of the process is about the F and it's about facing it. And so facing into the doubt and actually naming it. Because if you name it, it's one of the things I talk about is, you can tame it. So first of all, it's that surfacing it. And then it's about actually listening to it. So what's it here to tell me? Because there's wisdom in the doubt. So your doubt might be: I can't get round and actually, you know, at its simplest it's saying you need to go out and do the run tomorrow, Louise.

Louise Everett (11:08)

Yeah. And I need to do, I went straight into googling. I need to be doing more stretches. You know, the fuelling part is now so essential. So maybe it's surfaced and I listen to those insights. Yeah.

Jenny (11:26)

And what I love about what you've just described is then the next part about it, which is open it up. So actually explore what it is. So it's through your googling you're exploring what it is. And then interestingly, an appropriate, maybe not appropriately for what we're just talking about with your running, is the W which is walk forward.

Louise Everett (11:47)

Right.

Jenny (11:48)

So I'm going to say run forward. That's a really simple metaphor but you can actually - and process - but you can apply that to your own self-doubts through work and more complex situations. And then I talk about different ways of doing doubt in terms of situational doubt and systemic doubt as well. But it's all about thinking about it much more as a process, which is what makes it active.

Louise Everett (12:19)

This is so interesting, isn't it, that we feel these things, we're experiencing these things, but starting to create this awareness around it gives us so much more. It's given me, again back to my running example, it's given me a sense of sort of control what I feel about. I still don't know if I'm going to finish it. I still don't know if I'm going to get around. But this doubt I've been feeling and through those steps you've just mentioned, has made me feel like I have a little bit more sort of control towards a situation.

Jenny (12:54)

And also your doubt is good in this situation because it's something you've not done before, and it's indicating that you are growing and that you are encouraging yourself. And so often people will come to me. I mean, really common with coaching clients. They will come and say, I've just got promoted and I'm feeling I've got imposter syndrome. I have that conversation repeatedly, and I understand that conversation, and I've been there myself. And actually, I say: brilliant - which is not what they expect me to say as such. Because the imposter syndrome is a symptom if you like of: you're challenging yourself, you're in a growth space and that is brilliant, and you're pushing yourself and it's what you're then going to do with it. And so it's a really normal human experience to have, when you've got a new job and you don't know what to do. And actually, we need to humanise it. But also recognise actually: if you're feeling it, that's not a bad thing.

Louise Everett (14:04)

It's okay.

Jenny (14:06)

Yeah, it's okay. And let's use it as a process to figure out how to work through this as such. But you know, if you're not feeling imposter syndrome at some point, you're probably not pushing yourself enough.

Louise Everett (14:19)

No, right. You're not into that growth zone.

Jenny (14:23)

Yes, in the growth mindset.

Louise Everett (14:24)

So Jenny, many leaders worry that showing doubt will undermine their authority. So we've talked about recognising it and seeing it and noticing it. In your experience, how can leaders acknowledge uncertainty or doubt in a way that actually builds trust and credibility rather than eroding it?

Jenny (14:47)

Yeah, I think doubt is critical to build trust in leaders. That's my first point. Because nobody can have all of the answers. And so to create followership within your organisation, your people need to know actually that you're going to speak the truth and you're going to express what you do and don't know. And so actually, in its rawest form, it does create trust. And you ask me how do you do this? Because I think that's really important. If you just keep saying I don't know, I don't know. That's no help to anybody. And I think there's two points that I would make in this conversation, Louise. One is around space and the other is around language. So by space, what I encourage leaders to think about is how they create the space for doubt to show up. So that might be as simple as them listening for no doubt. So, you know, how many times do you sit around a table and you know, nobody's expressing any doubts. That's not healthy. That's not a high performing team at all.

So as a leader, how do you create space for your team to be able to share their doubts? So is that true? Then asking the questions actually directly, inviting, you know, what are your doubts about this.

Louise Everett (16:33)

Yeah, a very easy process.

Jenny (16:36)

Some of this is really easy. So thinking about, how can I as a leader create the space for active doubt to be constructive actually with my colleagues, is the first thing. And then the second part of that is then also about the language that we use. And so for me it's much more about leaning into the: I'm not sure, but I'm really curious about this. You know, so rather than sort of shutting things down, using sort of real possibility and maybe language and what if to invite more of that discussion. But you can preface it with, I don't know, let's unpack this. We don't know, but what do we know? And so the language that leaders are using, both in terms of their, it's about them role modelling doubt to enable the doubt also to be surfaced from their teams - so that collectively, particularly in situational doubt, you can get to better places together. So space and language is critical for leaders to exhibit.

Louise Everett (17:55)

Do you, in your experience, think leaders that you work with all the time, find it easy to modify their language to do that, to open the room up and the conversations, and let some of that uncertainty come through?

Jenny (18:14)

I think it depends. And it depends on the personality and it depends on. So one of the things that when I'm working with people we will actively explore is: what is their relationship with doubt? So, you know, getting to their own comfort levels with the role that it's played in their lives. And so that it's comfortable within themselves, first of all. And I think once you get that alignment and congruence within self, it

becomes easier than when they're working in partnership with their teams and with their stakeholders to do that. But it starts with self.

Louise Everett (18:59)

So understanding self before you can then start to understand or at least help others.

Jenny (19:06)

And understanding the positive role of it as well, which I guess is the core essence of what I'm talking about.

Louise Everett (19:13)

Absolutely. It's fully even though you know, well, I guess that's the reason you've called it *Brilliant Doubt*. You know, we would always see doubt as something that is perhaps a negative and it's absolutely not.

Jenny (19:30)

Well you might like this, but the phrase brilliant doubt I've had for years, and it's always been, I guess a private thing that I've thought about my clients. And I've always privately called them brilliant doubters. And it wasn't anything that I intended to use, to surface, it was never going to see the light of day on a website or anything. But I always thought, you know, who do I work with? And I was always just struck by, I'm working with these brilliant people and they're full of doubt. And hence where the brilliant doubters came from. And that's kind of where I guess my interest first came about with the book was, well, why is that? And is it because of their doubt that is making them brilliant? And that was the hypothesis for the book. And that's where I started to do the research and unpack it. And so I started with self-doubt. And as I got further down the doubt tunnel, I realised it was just a much bigger subject when I got into the research. But yes, my clients have and always have been called brilliant doubters.

Louise Everett (20:45)

And you refer to a few in the book as well, which is so lovely. Back to the book, you talk about the shift from a VUCA world - so a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment - to what some now describe as a BANI world, standing for brittle, anxious, non-linear and incomprehensible. Hearing those words, it almost feels inevitable that leaders are going to experience more doubt, not less. So what can leaders do to create a team or organisational culture where people feel safe to voice questions, challenge, and where doubt is explored constructively rather than mistaken for a lack of competence?

Jenny (21:42)

Yeah. And I think what you're really touching on is systemic doubt which is, how do you create a third layer, which allows doubt to surface. Because if you don't have that, then you end up with institutional blindness. And that can have serious major consequences, you know, both on individuals, the organisation and the people that that organisation is there to serve. So this is critical, absolutely critical. And for me, it's about the architecture and the culture that senior leaders create. And it starts at the top. And so when you're looking at how to create a culture of, where doubt is permissible and constructive and you can use it to the organisation's advantage, you've got to start with what's happening at the board

and with the senior leadership team. And you need to start looking at actually what's their relationship with it there, and how do they operate.

You know, what's happening in their meetings in terms of them allowing them to surface doubt? You know, if doubt is not “allowed” to be surfaced at those senior meetings, then you're not going to find doubt elsewhere in the organisation. The rest of the organisation is going to mirror that. A lot of my work, when I'm working with senior leadership teams, is actually looking at how doubt is surfaced in those meetings and coaching them around doing that. And then the second part of this, and it's where you're starting to get into governance as well, when you're looking at that top tier because doubt is critical for governance. It's critical in terms of that challenge and making sure that the organisation is operating in the way that it needs to.

And the second part of this is then saying, what are the processes that we can put in place to actually enable doubt to be surfaced? And that might be around things. So I talk about, actually I think that I don't talk about it about it in the book, but a good, a really good example is at Pixar. There you have the Brain Trust, which is if you're a director of a film, you can take your early rough cuts of the film to the Brain Trust, which is all experts who gather and they give their feedback, they give their critical feedback back to the director. So they're doubts and I'm sure some constructive things as well. And then the director can then do with that what they want to. They can take it on board, but they can also not. And that's a really good example of a process that's based in an organisation that creates, you know, formalises doubt, essentially. If you look at venture capitalists, they've got other processes that they also use, which is what I do talk about in the book, around how do we challenge what we're going to be investing in.

And actually other industries can actually take these ideas. And so actually, how do we populate this and make this relevant for us? And so those kinds of processes are really important around changing that culture. And then finally, and one of the big things that I also talk about is actually tracking doubt. So, you know, lots of organisations have employee engagement surveys where they're tracking, you know, where the heartbeat of the company is and what is happening with their employees. Actually, you can track how easy it is for doubt to be surfaced. So am I comfortable voicing my doubts? You could put it onto one of those surveys. That would be really meaningful, concrete data about how effective the organisation is about using doubt and start a conversation as well. You know, so this thing about have you got the architecture in place from the top all the way through the processes and then down to actually tracking it as well?

It's really important to systemise doubt.

Louise Everett (26:36)

Fantastic. And I think that's such a valid question to be asking. And there are a number of those questions. I've seen several of these surveys, these engagement surveys. And we have proposed, you know, over the years adding questions to these to really get to the heart of some of the matter. And it's often felt actually that they're a bit locked.

No, these are the questions we ask. And these are the questions we will continue to ask so we've got that sort of comparative metrics. But there has to come a point where some new questions, especially as the markets shift, as the globe changes and as uncertainty is rife, as you know, we're in a new world right now. You know, these questions need to meet and match.

Jenny (27:31)

Yes.

Louise Everett (27:32)

The feelings of what we need to know from employees particularly, to dig in, and sort of peel that onion, and get to the heart of some of these things.

Jenny (27:44)

Yes, and that will then make more engaged employees. And also, you will get to where we started at the beginning of this: greater clarity, better decision making, because it facilitates that.

Louise Everett (28:00)

Yeah. So Jenny, moving on to the harder part of our conversation today.

Jenny (28:09)

Oh, you hit the nail on the head with that.

Louise Everett (28:00)

We're moving away a little bit from *Brilliant Doubt* - I don't know, it might come up in your answer. So we're going to just take a step back for a moment. This year marks 20 years of Claritas. And over that time communications has changed rapidly. Some lessons still endure. If you could go back to your 20-year-old self, what's the one piece of career advice you would give?

Jenny (28:44)

I would probably stick with the doubt point because I was full of doubt at 20. And you know, I would argue I have led a life of doubt. So to my 20-year-old self I would say, first of all, realise everyone doubts - from the CEO through the organisation. And that's what being human is. And instead of running away from it, instead of retreating, ask it how it can help you, and realise, actually it's here to help rather than to hinder. And I think I got there eventually, but it took me an awful long time to get there. And so I think if I could have said that to my 20-year-old self, particularly in my 20s, where I was really full of doubts around my ability, it would have made a huge difference.

Louise Everett (29:52)

So there is still that red thread, and your doubt has led through to your brilliance as well, through your corporate career and through your coaching career. It really has.

Jenny (30:06)

That's the irony is that it's an enabler. But my goodness, it took me a long time to realise that. And you know, you can't go back and change it and I wouldn't want to go back and change it, but, you know, the what if I'd realised that sooner? I did a session last week for International Women's Day talking about all the great stuff we're talking about with professional doubt. And invariably, imposter syndrome came up and self-doubt came up, and it was kind of the lion's share of that conversation, which I understand and get. And as soon as you start to challenge people around it and to think differently, you know, honestly Louise, I could see people shifting and changing in the room.

Louise Everett (30:57)

I bet. I bet. We're not very gentle with ourselves, are we? There are these social sort of stigmas. And you know, what you're doing with *Brilliant Doubt* is changing that narrative. Changing that, it's a bad thing, you know, uncertainty, doubt, not having the clarity. That's a bad thing. And you know, your example, you experienced it when you were 20. You know, we need to have a little more compassion. But I think society needs to enable that as well.

Jenny (31:34)

Completely. And our leaders as well.

Louise Everett (31:40)

So looking forward, if you could put one idea or piece of advice into a time capsule, what would it be? And why does it matter?

Jenny (31:52)

Well, we're moving rapidly into this AI machine orientated world, and doubt is what makes us human. There are other things. So, what I'd be putting into the capsule is: doubt is what makes us human. And our real power is how we use that doubt to challenge and to question and to keep questioning the automation and the AI so that we use it constructively and to get to a better place. And you know, I hope in 20 years' time we haven't lost that. And if we can keep hold of that on our journey and our partnership with the machines, that's what's really going to make the difference, or part of the difference. And we need it more than ever.

Louise Everett (32:52)

That leads into, there's a lot of discussion around judgment. You know, judgment is what AI can't do right now. And doubt is part of that. You know, doubt is part of having that judgment. The ability to have that judgment. You've got to see it first, you have to recognise it, which is exactly that first step that you took us on in our conversation today.

Jenny (33:19)

So we've got to really start recognising that that's part of what we bring. That's part of our gift. It's part of our contribution, it's part of what will make the automated world successful. And if you forget that, then we're in trouble. But we don't have to forget it.

Louise Everett (33:40)

Jenny, we could go on, I know we could. It's such a deep topic. I would encourage everyone that's listening to get a copy of your book. Today's conversation reminds us that doubt isn't the opposite of clarity. It may be one of the ways you actually find it.

Jenny (34:07)

Yeah.

Louise Everett (34:08)

So thank you so much for all of your deep perspectives and thinking today. It's invaluable. Thank you.

Jenny (34:16)

My pleasure, I've really enjoyed it, so thank you for having me.

Louise Everett (34:21)

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You're welcome. Lovely.

If this episode gave you a new perspective on doubt and clarity, please share it with the leader who might find it useful. And remember, sometimes the path to clarity begins with the courage to pause, question, and think again. Thanks for listening to ClarityMatters.