BEYOND THE LEADERSHIP FAÇADE

...let them see you sweat

A CONVERSATION WITH JULIE WINKLE GIULIONI · BY GISELLE HUDSON

The very first time I reached out to Julie Winkle Giulioni, author, researcher, speaker, career growth whisperer, it was on a whim. A heartfelt, intuitive nudge. Something about her writing felt refreshingly real. Not "personal brand" real. Not perfectly polished. But human real. And I sensed that this was a woman who knew what it meant to care deeply, show up fully, and still wrestle with the doubts that swirl around all of us doing work that matters. I emailed her. She responded. Warmly.

The seeds of this friendship began in 2020, in the middle of a pandemic, between two kindred spirits: one hiding out to write her next book, and one (me) in the Caribbean, slowly building a new rhythm in my business, one grounded in alignment and meaningful conversation. The connection felt easy. Natural. Like we'd always known each other somehow.

From there, we kept in touch: short emails, kind words, glimmers of recognition, sharing windows into our lives. We joked about her coming to Trinidad and Tobago someday.

Early on, I had subscribed to Julie's newsletter *Talent Matters*. And on March 18, 2025, the feature article, *Let 'Em Sweat: The Illusion of Effortlessness*, published first on SmartBrief, got me thinking deeply about leading. It wasn't just another polished piece on leadership. It was an unmasking.

As someone who works in alignment and sensemaking, the kind of soul-and-structure work that surfaces what's often unspoken, I know how dangerous this illusion can be. So I reached out to Julie to invite her to chat with me. I told her how her words hit home:

> *"I wanted to reach out because I read your article this week on the illusion of effortlessness in leadership, and it really got me thinking. The idea of making things look easy when, in reality, effort and struggle are essential to growth resonated deeply. As someone who works with business leaders on alignment, I see this dynamic play out often, and your insights struck a chord."*

This was a conversation we needed to have: about growth, struggle, missteps, and what it really takes to become the kind of leader who helps others rise.

EARLY LESSONS IN CONFIDENCE AND THE SEEDS OF DEVELOPMENT

Before she was a bestselling author, keynote speaker, and globally respected voice in leadership development, Julie was a modeling and charm teacher. Yes, really. And no, this wasn't about tiaras and pageantry.

> *"What I learned in that role was the incredible transformational power of helping someone feel just a little more confident in who they are."*

Teaching young girls how to walk, sit, speak, and own their presence wasn't about performance. It was about possibility. Julie discovered that when people feel seen and capable, something inside them begins to align. That alignment becomes momentum. And that momentum becomes growth.

"Even now, decades later," she said, "I see that same magic happen in a boardroom when a leader starts to believe in themselves again. Confidence changes everything."

THE MIRAGE OF 'TRAINING' AND WHAT REAL DEVELOPMENT REQUIRES

As co-founder of DesignArounds, Julie has spent years helping Fortune 500 companies reimagine what growth and learning can look like in the workplace. But not all companies get it.

"There's a massive difference," she said, "between checking a box and changing a mindset."

I asked her what that difference looked like in practice. Organizations that truly embrace development are willing to slow down. They create space for dialogue, for experimentation, for reflection. The others? They want to plug in a training module and call it transformation.

Julie's voice didn't carry judgment, just clarity. She believes deeply in the potential of people, but she knows that potential is often stifled by systems designed for compliance, not curiosity.

"The companies that really get it," she said, "are the ones asking why someone isn't growing, and then doing the deeper work to remove those barriers."

WHEN WE PRETEND IT'S EASY, WE ALL LOSE

That now-famous SmartBrief article came from a personal reckoning.

"I spent years perfecting an illusion," Julie confessed. "That everything was effortless. That I could take on anything with a breezy 'sure, no problem' and deliver flawlessly."

It is a pattern many high-performing women, and frankly, many leaders, fall into. Julie traced it back to a desire to appear competent, calm, and in control. But over time, the mask began to suffocate her.

> *"I realized that by never letting others see me sweat, I wasn't helping them. I was actually hurting them."*

Her words could have been my own, whispered behind my façade of confidence. And truthfully, we've all done it: polished the story, skipped the messy middle, downplayed the labor. Julie was bold enough to own it publicly. In our conversation, she expanded on this idea:

> *"When we hide the struggle, we send the message that struggle equals failure. And that's just not true. Struggle is the birthplace of strength."*

She wasn't advocating for vulnerability-as-performance, but for a more honest leadership model, one where we narrate the process, not just show the glossy finish.

"Let them see the sweat," she said. "It gives them permission to grow."

DEFINING SUCCESS BEYOND THE LADDER

Julie's book *Promotions Are So Yesterday* challenges the traditional vertical career model, and I couldn't wait to ask her about it. She lit up when we got there.

"We've sold this very narrow story of success: climb the ladder, get the title, move up or move out," she said. "But so many people don't actually want that. They want growth that aligns with their values."

In her research and consulting, Julie found that the most fulfilled employees weren't always the ones rising to the top. They were the ones evolving in place, mastering new skills, mentoring others, innovating within their roles.

Her Talent Development Framework identifies eight dimensions of development, from contribution to confidence to connection.

"Organizations that expand their definition of success can tap into so much more energy and engagement," she said. "It's not about having fewer promotions. It's about having more pathways." And it's about alignment.

> *"When people feel like their work reflects who they are and what they care about, everything shifts."*

MISALIGNMENT: THE HIDDEN DRAIN ON LEADERSHIP

Given our shared obsession with alignment, I asked Julie: how do you know when a leader is out of sync with their strengths or purpose? Her answer was immediate.

"You'll hear it in the language," she said. "Words like 'should,' 'have to,' 'no choice.' There's a kind of resignation that creeps into how they talk about their work."

She also flagged behavior patterns: procrastination, micromanagement, over-functioning. But more than anything, Julie listens for disconnection.

> *"When someone is deeply aligned, there's a hum. A kind of energy. You can feel it. When it's gone? That's the signal."*

In her coaching, she gently invites leaders back to themselves. Not with jargon or big declarations, but with small, catalytic questions:

> *"What part of your work still lights you up?"*
> *"What would you do if you weren't afraid of disappointing anyone?"*

These are the questions that bring people home to themselves.

RECALIBRATION AND THE COURAGE TO BEGIN AGAIN

Julie's career has been anything but linear. Teacher, consultant, keynote speaker, author. I asked her if she'd ever had to realign her own path.

"Oh, many times," she laughed. "But the one that stands out most was when I left a full-time corporate role to start my own business."

It wasn't just a career move. It was an identity shift. For someone so used to being the steady force behind the scenes, stepping into entrepreneurship meant becoming more visible, and that was terrifying.

> *"I had to reckon with all these stories I'd told myself about safety, about value, about being 'ready.'"*

What helped her through? Conversations. Friends. The same kind of grounded reflection she now offers others.

"And I've never regretted it," she said. "Because the work I do now is mine. It reflects what I believe, how I serve, and the impact I want to make."

LETTING THEM SEE THE SWEAT

Julie Winkle Giulioni is known for her grace, her intellect, and her wildly practical frameworks. But what makes her rare, and utterly magnetic, is her willingness to pull back the curtain. To tell the truth. To let you see the sweat.

Her message is clear: you don't have to pretend. Leaders aren't meant to be superheroes. They're meant to be human. And it's in that humanness, raw, real, resilient, that the real magic happens.

This spotlight is for every leader who's been told to "just handle it." For every woman who's been praised for making it look easy. For every professional silently burning out under the weight of the mask.

Let this be your permission slip. Let them see the sweat. You'll be stronger for it. And you won't be alone.

THREE TAKEAWAYS FROM JULIE'S SPOTLIGHT

1 *Effortlessness is a myth.*
Julie challenges the polished illusion many leaders uphold, urging us to reveal the real journey, not just the end result. Hiding the struggle denies others the chance to grow through it.

2 *Redefine success beyond promotion.*
Her work reframes career development from the outdated "ladder" to a multidimensional framework that centres growth, values and fulfilment, not just titles.

3 *Alignment is audible.*
Misalignment shows up in language and energy. Listen for the "shoulds." Cues like resignation, burnout or over-functioning point the way back to purpose.



Julie Winkle Giulioni

pronounced jū-lē-ō-nē

Author, researcher, speaker, and authority on leadership and career development. Co-author of *Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go* and author of *Promotions Are So Yesterday*.

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