



Rana Dajani

Rana Dajani: [00:00:00] How do we motivate children to love to learn? And if you motivate them to love to learn, they become lifelong learners, because it's so much fun. They'll keep doing it outside the classroom walls and outside the classroom hours forever.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:15] Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. This is Annalies Corbin, Chief Goddess of the PAST Foundation and your host. We hear frequently that the global education system is broken. In fact, we spend billions of dollars trying to fix something that's actually not broken at all, but rather irrelevant. It's obsolete. A hundred years ago, it functioned fine. So, let's talk about how we reimagine, rethink, and redesign our educational system.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:49] So, today's episode of Learning Unboxed, we have a very exciting conversation. We are going to talk to an amazing author, a research scientist and advocate around the world, and joining us to talk about sort of her work, and the influence on her thinking about the world and the future of education, is Rana Dajani. And so, we're super excited to have her join us. So, welcome to the program.

Rana Dajani: [00:01:14] Thank you for having me. I am excited to learn and share at the same time.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:19] Excellent. And just to set some context for our listeners, it is really, really tough to sort of do a bio for you, because quite frankly, for everybody listening, Rana's experience, the things she's done is just absolutely amazing. So, she has a PhD in molecular cell biology. She has received more accolades and recognitions from around the world than many people we get the opportunity to talk to, including Fulbright Fellow.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:49] She has participated in the Clinton Global Initiative. She is a Fulbright visiting scholar program from Jordan to the United States, and just on, and on, and on. She is also, and one of the things I'm really excited to talk about, the author of the book, *Five Scarves: Doing the Impossible, If We Can Reverse Cell Fate, Why Can't We Redefine Success?* And if you've not looked at *Five Scarves* or encountered it, I highly recommend, every woman and educator around the globe should take a look.

Annalies Corbin: [00:02:23] And we're going to dig in here in a moment and talk about *Five Scarves*, but just to sort of give us a little bit of a high-level explanation, this volume is an exploration of the intersections between gender, race, religion, and science, told through the eyes of one of the world's leading Muslim women scientists, Dr. Dajani. And she's the professor, as we said, of molecular biology, and she is really seeking a paradigm shift in the fight against women's oppression. And so, with that, Rana, share with us a little bit about the sort of why. What is your big 100,000-foot view calling into the world that says, hey, this is the space I need to occupy in the work I need to do?

Rana Dajani: [00:03:04] Well, that's not an easy question. And I think it really boils down to seeing inside ourselves on what is it that makes us up every morning and what is it that we're excited about that gives us the spice in our life, that keeps us moving, that motivates us. And to me, the feeling is that if I have anything, I want to share it with humanity and I want to also learn from the people around me, and the wonderful nature and universe around me.

Rana Dajani: [00:03:42] And I think that excitement never ends. It's like you're on a roller coaster to the last day of your life with this magical curiosity driving you and the opportunity in front of you that you're seeking that you know is going to give you even a better experience, whatever it is. But even negative things are not negative. They are just opportunities that are learning experiences, that you take with you, and move on as you go forward.

Annalies Corbin: [00:04:09] Yeah, and what a beautiful space to occupy it, just to sort of wrestle with this notion of getting folks to embrace being a lifelong learner, and as you indicated, the joy that can potentially come from that. If you say the world is an amazing place, and there is something that I can learn every day, and there is something that I can teach others every day and every moment as well, that's a really remarkable sort of space or outlook, if you will. So, help us understand, tie that back into, why write this book? Why was it necessary for you?

Rana Dajani: [00:04:45] So, I think now, retrospectively, I urge everybody to write their story, because everybody has some unique experience that they owe it to the world to share, to inspire, to learn from. And so, having said that now, first, I wasn't thinking of writing a book at all, I was just being the scientist, the one who does things and embraces things as I go. But then, I realized that sometimes, our voices are not heard or they're heard in a particular way. And so, we don't have the chance to give a fair explanation of who we are and what we think about.

Rana Dajani: [00:05:27] And because our life is short, however long we live, and there's a limited number of encounters we can have, one way to keep that for future generations and to reach out to other people around the world of a legacy is to write, because the written word, it transcends. And I felt it was a duty, especially with globalization, domination of particular cultures, and the underlying of particular voices and cultures that we have to say and tell our story. Because if we don't, somebody else will tell our story and we can't blame them, right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:04] Right.

Rana Dajani: [00:06:04] So, we owe it. And that's kind of the present why I wrote my story. And now, it's so enriching, because you learn from it and you learn from the feedback of your readers that I'm actually writing two other books at this moment to share. And this is just a shoutout. You don't have to be specialized or expert. Just write from your heart.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:27] Absolutely right, from your heart. And tell your story, because there is, in fact, so much value in that. And I love the premise that if you don't tell your story, somebody else will. And as an anthropologist, I spent the majority of my career thinking about and trying to understand the ins and outs of humanity. And people ask me all the time, what does that thing, anthropologists?

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:46] I said, oh, well, we're the scientists of humanity, right? We are the ones studying what is the humanness of being a human, right? And so, the story is critical to that, and understanding,

respecting other cultures. And so, I think it's really intriguing, and I think part of what really appealed to me so much about your work is the fact that you did that very same thing, and yet you ran at it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:07:10] And this is the thing that I love, so I wanted to get into the weeds of this, just a little bit for our listeners. You ran at it from the molecular biology, that scientific hat, that world that you've lived and trained in, and you said, hey, what if we approach this very same conversation, which, quite frankly, at the end of the day, is really about culture, but we're going to do it from a different perspective.

Annalies Corbin: [00:07:30] And oh, by the way, along the way, I'm going to help the world come with me on my journey into saying, hey, we need to do something about some of the gender inequities that are so prevalent on our planet. So, talk to us a little bit about sort of the premise, the approach that you took, for folks that haven't had a chance to go out, and grab, and read, and digest that book, but I'm hoping by the time we finish, everybody runs out to buy a copy.

Rana Dajani: [00:07:53] I hope so, too. Actually, the premise comes, as you mentioned, from science, which to me, equals nature. And the thing is, we have our beliefs, and our belief systems, and our perceptions of what we see around us. And you as an anthropologist would know a lot more than me on human relationships and concepts. But these are very transient and they depend on different humans with different perspectives.

Rana Dajani: [00:08:18] I could have my own perspective and you could see the same thing, but have a totally different perspective. So, who do I trust? How do I know how to go forward? And so, to me, it's about using nature around me, observing it, trying to understand it, using my mind and my brain, which is part of nature, and applying the scientific method of analysis gives me something I can hold on to.

Rana Dajani: [00:08:41] Now, even having said that, that doesn't mean the science I discover is set in stone. Actually, the hallmark of any scientist or of any human being who is successful, meaning survives, is being curious and being critical at every intersection. So, yesterday, I make an observation, and they come up with a conclusion, and discover a theory. But tomorrow, somebody else with new tools or because they are different from me, they can see something new.

Rana Dajani: [00:09:12] But using that same framework kind of gives some kind of continuity of being curious, using your mind and logic as we unfold and discover things as we go. So, to me, using that as an approach, which usually people don't, I tackled the issue of gender and women, and how they are perceived in their workplace, their percentages of the workplace, and asking those fundamental questions, and even challenging the questions themselves.

Rana Dajani: [00:09:42] Because one thing, I say no, because you keep repeating the same question. How can we get more women in the workplace? How can we push women forward? And it's all about, how can we do this to women? And nobody asked women what they really want, which I draw from science, if you keep asking the same question, you're hitting a wall, it means you're asking the wrong question.

Annalies Corbin: [00:10:01] Wrong question. Yeah, absolutely. No question, whatsoever. And so, so share with us then, so there are five scarves, as the title indicates. And each one of these scarves metaphorically represents a tenant that is very important to you in the way that you're thinking about your work in the world. And so, just very, very high level, give us an overview of the five scarves, and then we're going to dig into one of those in particular.

Rana Dajani: [00:10:25] Yeah. So, the first one is always the one I'm most proud of is I'm a mother, right? That's fundamentally human and the most important thing that we can do for our species. The second is I'm an

educator, a teacher, whether as a school teacher, and then as a university. And actually, we're all teachers, because we're always sharing what we know. The third one is I'm a scientist.

Rana Dajani: [00:10:44] I work in molecular biology, looking at ethnic populations, and genetics, and epigenetics, how the environment affects us. And then, my fourth is being a social entrepreneur, founding the program, We Love Reading, changing mindsets to reading to create change makers. And the last one is defending a woman's right to find her place in the world rightfully, and being respected, and leading from that premise going forward. But that's a whole story that you have to read the book to learn.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:17] Oh, absolutely. We're not going to go into a lot of those weeds. But again, I do encourage folks who are listening, if you've not seen this, please do. Go grab a copy of it, dig in, because there's a lot to learn from it. And I think the other piece is a lot to inspire you to not stop your own journey, right? To roll up your sleeves, and say, I am part of the global narrative and that every single individual has a contribution to make within that narrative.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:47] So, I really appreciate that about the work. But I want to dig into one of those scarves in particular. We Love Reading, right? And so, because I think that for the listeners on Learning Unboxed, that's going to cross so many different principles that we utilize and are thinking about the why of this program and the value of spending time talking about those positive disruptions in education, because there's a lot of conversation, rightfully, and sometimes, wrongly, about the dysfunction or the fact that our global education system is actually not serving humanity today in the ways that it should.

Annalies Corbin: [00:12:25] And there are many, many examples out there in the world of how that's changing or that's not actually the case, that there are really amazing things that are happening. And if we could harness, we could powerfully go out and grab a hold of all of those really super examples of the great things that are happening, pull them all together when it makes sense, and actually launch something new, that's the entrepreneur component of all of it, they might truly make a difference in the world. And so, let's talk about We Love Reading, and sort of the premise, and what it is that you're doing with that, and how it functions.

Rana Dajani: [00:13:02] Absolutely. I couldn't agree with you more about the positive disruption, and the hope and optimism that if we really trust our gut feeling, that we can make a difference. So, We Love Reading, I mean, first of all, the name itself is an action verb, and it's about a collective we, and then love, and then reading continuously. What it aims to do is to build, I like to call it education resilience, a lifelong learner, because what it does, it focuses on fostering motivation to want to learn, because you want to, not because you have to.

Rana Dajani: [00:13:42] And I think that's the fundamental thing. In education systems we see today, they put the cart before the horse, meaning they put all the curricula, the teacher training, but they forget that the student, the child, or the adult, or the human being, if they're not motivated, nothing is going to make them go and learn. And if they are dragged, because of a school system, they're out of school by 18, and now, with the internet, nobody is even going to school, or with COVID.

Rana Dajani: [00:14:07] So, what is in it? So, I think that's the first premise, is how do we motivate children to love to learn? And if you motivate them to love to learn, they become lifelong learners, because it's so much fun. They'll keep doing it outside the classroom walls and outside the classroom hours forever. And why does this become so important? In addition to the motivation, inspiration is that the world is changing and changing at a very fast pace.

Rana Dajani: [00:14:35] And we don't know what our children growing up are growing up into, a world that we don't even know what it's going to look like. So, the only thing we can do is to equip them with the tools and the skills to be independent learners, lifelong learners. And the only way we can do it is by this motivation. So, how does this tie into my program? What we've discovered is that to motivate somebody to learn, starts with motivating somebody to want to read for fun, because reading leads to learning.

Rana Dajani: [00:15:03] That's the only way we access, right? It's about, you read something, you follow up with it. Even if you're apprenticing with somebody, you're learning from somebody, ultimately, you have to go back and read because of the wealth of information, richness that you have from the past, and you have to cross the world for different resources, you have to read. And to read means to be patient.

Rana Dajani: [00:15:23] To read means to be curious. To read means to be persistent. And how do you make a child do all that? It has to come from within them. And so, that's where the other part, which is reading for fun, not just reading for the sake of reading or to unlock how to connect letters together. It's about reading for fun, something that you can't wait to do. Under the covers, you're begging somebody, that thing. And that thing only starts very early.

Rana Dajani: [00:15:52] And the older you get, the more difficult it is to plant that, because it has to do with your brain and the neural networks, and how as they connect, there becomes an association between the feeling of security, love, and happiness when somebody is reading with you, because you don't read for fun. It doesn't happen by itself. Again, it's back to the we. It's a community thing.

Rana Dajani: [00:16:13] It's about a caregiver, a parent who cuddles up with a child, and reads aloud, and shares that joy. That's where that pleasure becomes entrenched, and that's where that motivation starts blooming, and the child becomes the driver of learning and seeking opportunities to learn regardless of the circumstances around them. And that is the world that our children are going to go into and we need to have them prepared. So, that's the premise of We Love Reading on one hand for the children. Now, We Love Reading has another impact.

Rana Dajani: [00:16:48] So, that's the child. There are the adults. Because what we do is we train youth and adults to read aloud to the children so that we can plant that education resilience, that motivation. But what we discovered is that this adult was reading aloud to the kids in their native language in a public space where they run this reading aloud session, and own it, and have the freedom to quit whenever they want, because they're volunteering and they're doing it for their own good, they discover their inner potential and they become change makers in their own right.

Rana Dajani: [00:17:19] So, actually, they discover their voices literally as they read aloud to the kids, and they discover their voices figuratively by discovering their own potential, saying, if I can gather kids, and read aloud to them, and change them, what else can I change in my community? And I think that second thing is very important in learning, and growing, and positive disruption, because most of the time, all programs that are rolled out, whether to underserved communities in the majority or even those communities who are more served, it's all about somebody giving something to someone else. It's about service.

Rana Dajani: [00:17:54] It's about I know, you don't know, I'm going to teach you. And that's a very negative approach. The approach is to trust people and they know better what's good for them. And they just need that push, that encouragement to realize how and have that self-confidence. And then, they're just going to bloom and they will solve their problems. They don't need you or a government to come in and solve it. They'll ask for help, but they don't need you to lead it, and therefore has sustainability built into it to continue making the

difference. So, just in a nutshell, it's changing the minds, that's why we say change, We Love Reading is about changing mindsets for reading to create change makers.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:35] Yeah. And no question that that's going to be one of those long-term positive side effects of that type of experience. I'm curious about sort of how this program scaffolds. And maybe I'm not using the correct word, so please help me out if that's the case. But one of the things, for example, that I see frequently with literacy programs, and there are a lot of them, as you were well aware, all around the world, and to your point, a lot of them are all around the adult, whoever is delivering the content is the expert.

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:10] And what I know from many years at PAST is I think that we learn as much, if not more, every single day from the time that we spent immersed with kids, with children, then goes the other direction, right? And so, given that, one of the things that I'm really curious about, because volunteer literacy programs, and I'm using that term very loosely, but volunteer literacy programs oftentimes struggle with getting volunteers and mentors, because the adults struggle with literacy themselves, often in the spaces and the places where we most desperately need the influence and impact of these types of programs.

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:55] So, how do you manage that disconnect if in case that's really what you see? And I think for our listeners, because one of the things we didn't really sort of set very much is you didn't necessarily grow up in the US, but you've worked all over the world, so I would assume that whichever hat you had on at any given moment, you've seen some of these same scenarios. I'm really curious about that adult piece, that mentorship, and that learning opportunity that comes on that flipside. How do you help folks that might themselves be skills-or-confidence-deficient step into that space?

Rana Dajani: [00:20:37] That's a very important question and fundamental to what we do at We Love Reading. And we call it, actually, our secret sauce. It's our magic, right? And we were doing it without noticing. And that's the beauty when you do something organically and naturally, but it was noticed by others, right? UNESCO, when I was telling them the story of We Love Reading, they told me, but Rana, your program is all about inspiring adults.

Rana Dajani: [00:21:03] I said, really? I never thought of it that way. I was just thinking of the kids. So, point on with your question, so what we've discovered, our secret sauce, is that we when we invite youth and adults, and that's what we say, 16 to 100 years old, to come and join, we invite them to come and join—first of all, they're free to join if they want and they're free to quit.

Rana Dajani: [00:21:24] The power of having the freedom to quit cannot be underestimated, because most programs are all about, you got to do this with me, there's a signing contract, you have to abide by the rules, it's like, what? Why should I do that for you? And you're not even paying me, so what's the deal? Or, if you want to pay them, then it becomes unsustainable, because you can't keep that money flowing or you're competing with someone else.

Rana Dajani: [00:21:49] So, it's all wrong. And so, what we say, this is up to you. If you want to do it, you're welcome. And you're doing it for yourself. You're not doing it for us, and you can quit. So, what we do is, the training is about holding hands and going on a journey where it's a very interactive training, where the person who's in the journey discovers questions and attempts to answer them from their own experience.

Rana Dajani: [00:22:17] So, it's more about them discovering themselves, understanding their own community environment, and peer-to-peer learning from others, what do they say? How is their opinion compared to the rest of the group, rather than being your receivers of information from somebody up there? So, it's not a sage on the stage. It's about a guide on the side, a facilitator, but in the end, they are leading the discussion, and

they are guiding the discussion, and they are contributing to actually the training by sharing their opinions and their answers about their own selves and their own communities that are incorporated into the next training for someone else.

Rana Dajani: [00:22:56] So, they see the names of people before them and they know that they will be part of the training for the future generation. So this instills in them this feeling of, I am important, I count, my opinion counts, and I am the expert for my community. No one else is more expert than me, because in the end, the training goes about, why do they think reading's important?

Rana Dajani: [00:23:19] Why don't children read from their own perspective. And then, ultimately, we all come to the conclusion, it's about the motivation and the fun, and they train how to read aloud as an art. And again, the reading children's books in their native language, they don't have to be skilled. They don't have to be educated. They don't even have to know how to read, because it's a children's books with a lot of pictures.

Rana Dajani: [00:23:39] So, you actually make it up and that's okay. But ultimately, in the end, we tell the, okay, so now, you're going to read aloud to the kids in your neighborhood, you know the best place, you know where the kids come, you know when to bring them, you know how to get to them. We don't know anything. We want to learn from you. And so, they become the leaders. And then, we have a session about fears and hopes.

Rana Dajani: [00:24:00] Like what do you fear to go and do this in your community? We don't answer that question. It's the group, the peer-to-peer, who help each other. And so, one woman will tell the other, wait, what are you scared of? Oh, for example, if the community is going to accept, she tells her, oh, forget about it, I'll tell you what to do. And so, they help each other. What are their fears? What are their hopes?

Rana Dajani: [00:24:18] And so, this peer-to-peer is so important in that learning journey. And in the end, they go home with a bag of books, but that's it. They're set free in the sense that they can do whatever they want with it. And they can take the books, they don't want to take the books, they can do whatever they want. And the other part of the magical sauce is that when we don't follow up with them, our approach is not that they report to us, or that we measure them, or that, no, no, no, or evaluate, no, no, we reach out, and say, could you share with us your stories, your successes?

Rana Dajani: [00:24:54] I mean, you're our heroes. You're our celebrities. We want to showcase you. You are the ones that we are so proud to be part of, of your work. And so, they share with us their stories and that's why we change the paradigm on how we measure success, which actually leads to, how do you measure achievements in education? It's not the grades and the questions, because people are very diverse.

Rana Dajani: [00:25:16] It's about sharing stories of what you've achieved yourself, because those sharings are sustainable. Those impacts are sustainable, because they're real. They're not just numbers on a paper. They're not just how many good books given out and how many people attended a training. And that's why when international NGOs approached us, they wanted to implement our program within their geographical location, they questioned, they said, oh, you're not paying people?

Rana Dajani: [00:25:43] And we said, no. They said, oh, you're going to fail. We just smiled, and we said, you'll see. And of course, after they rolled out the program, five years later, our volunteers, the We Love Reading ambassadors are still doing it, while other programs, everybody just checked out, that was it, finish the project, everybody went home. So, this sustainability is our secret sauce that hopefully answers your question, but it really harks into our evolution as a species, that we need to feel that we are important and to acknowledge that in ourselves, our self-awareness, our self-acceptance that builds and boost our confidence,

that is reinforced by the children first, and then by the community, because everybody starts looking up to our ambassador as a leader.

Rana Dajani: [00:26:28] If she's a woman, or he's a grandfather, or even youth, that, wow, look at what they're doing, and it's so simple. It's just about reading aloud to kids in your native language. But because of that simplicity, which actually, it took me three years of developing the program in my neighborhood. I was actually doing it in my neighborhood. And for those three years as I was doing a trial and error, of course, now, I realized that it's called human-centered design, and I said, oh, really?

Rana Dajani: [00:26:57] I mean, I was just doing what I thought was the right thing do. And then, now, as a biologist, I call it, no, that was all natural evolution. It's like for survival of the fittest until I boiled it down to the simplest formula or the most empirical formula where it still works with the least input. And because of that, it has spread all over the world, to now, 62 countries, because it's based on shared universal values. That's just a basic skeleton of a framework that's so flexible that you tailor it to your own culture, your own context, wherever and whoever you are.

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:31] And I would actually argue that that's—I would pin, that actually is the secret sauce. I understand your perspective on the secret sauce, but stepping back and sort of looking at it, 50,000-foot view, it seems to me that part of the secret sauce is the fact that you very purposefully understand human culture and that you understand the interconnectedness between the sort of living in world and life experiences of a given community and neighborhood, however you want to place it, right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:09] But that thing is living and breathing. And by recognizing that it's living and breathing in, it might not be exactly like the community, the neighborhood right next door, and you don't treat them as absolutely the same, even though they may be in the same state, the same country, the same ethnic group. None of that matters, because the reality is, as you well know, the success is at that very nascent ground neighborhood level, right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:37] Those individuals that then others will flock to and will learn from, and back to the point of, in the native language, you can make the story up, that all of that's okay, it's about that human connection. You did, in fact, start with that human-centric design perspective, but I think that the success is probably the fact that you recognize that it has to be at a very individualized local community-based level to be successful, because human culture trumps so many things.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:07] We see it every day, right? We see it in politics. We see it in evolution. We see it in so many different places. So, I want to dig into two things. So, I really want to ask you, what were some of the aha moments? Because I have no doubt in your journey around We Love Reading that you have learned some very profound things from the participants. And so, I'm really curious, is there a moment or two that were such ahas that you were like, oh, my gosh, I didn't expect this, or I was so thrilled to have found it?

Rana Dajani: [00:29:43] Well, I love your questions, because I'm learning so much, because you're asking me to reflect and that doesn't always happen in that way. So, thank you. I really appreciate it. And I like you—so now, I have two spices. I have two secret spices, without people pointing that one out. Alright. So, my aha moments, and I'm just thinking on the spot now, this is not as a result of any-

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:07] This is a conversation, yeah. I'm sure you'll think of others later, but just like on the fly, there's bound to be something. And I think there's a lot of value in those curiosity things that are just really stuck with you.

Rana Dajani: [00:30:17] I think one fundamental one that keeps hitting me every time is that this works. It's just as simple as that, because sometimes, one doubts oneself. And I think humans, if you can imagine something, then it's possible. And that's the power of human imagination. But sometimes, you doubt your dream, and you think, maybe it's just in my head. But then, I meet this amazing woman and they share with me their stories of how they've changed and how they've covered themselves.

Rana Dajani: [00:30:53] And you see it in their eyes, and the way they speak, and and how their life has transformed, and you say, oh, my God, this really works. And to me, it gives me goosebumps when I think of it. So, imagine every one of us, if we had a dream that we believed in, and actually went out and did it, how the whole world would change. It's as simple as that. Sometimes, you think, could it be that simple? Yes, it can be that simple. So, that's one of my, really, aha moments that actually keeps repeating itself every time.

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:23] Yeah, I love that. That's beautiful. Same question. Flip side, right? So, what has been the greatest difficulty or a constraint that you've bumped up against on this journey that, again, you were surprised by? You're an optimist, I can tell. You are a perpetual optimist. So, given that, you're going to go out there and conquer the world, but I have no doubt there were walls that you hit. So, share with us one or two of those, the same sort of thing. It was profound.

Rana Dajani: [00:31:53] Yeah, thank you. First of all, about the optimist, my husband says, I see an ocean in a drop of water, so-

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:06] I love that.

Rana Dajani: [00:32:06] ... that's his quote always. Yeah. So, even when people ask me that question, I say, wait a minute, I don't remember being in any challenge. And I think, no, no, Rana, you have to think about it in a different way, because like I said, every challenge to me is an opportunity to learn. But I've learned to flip the question in my mind, so I can answer you. So, I think one of the challenges that I faced is, so I started off, I want to do something good myself, because if I'm not going to do it, I would feel responsible for the children around me, because I discovered the solution, right?

Rana Dajani: [00:32:32] But then, as I progressed from this idea as a social entrepreneur to become an organization, a nonprofit, and spreading around the world, unconsciously, I slipped into that mentality, because of all the people around you, the mentors, the funders, the international community is like, how are you getting your money? What are you doing? And of course, you're right, and maybe I'll just focus on one, which is the funding.

Rana Dajani: [00:32:57] You write nine grants, and you get one of them, and you become so caught up in these bureaucratic, let's say, business kind of things that sometimes, you forget what was this all about. And I think to me, that was a challenge that I faced, because it happened without me noticing, and then suddenly, I woke up. And I woke up because we were trying to think of different ways, so we offer the program for free for individuals, which has always been our case.

Rana Dajani: [00:33:26] But it was always a tension, because people tell us, no, you've got to pay money. What's the question that every investor talks about? Like what's your value proposition? How do you make money? I said, why are you worried about that? Right? We have a great program. So, I always insisted, the program is free for individuals. This is not about gathering money, because nobody can afford two dollars to pay for something.

Rana Dajani: [00:33:52] They either do it because they want to or they don't, and that's it. So, I thought, okay, we will partner with international NGOs and they would pay us a fee to use our program, kind of like a licensing fee. And they already have a lot of money and this is just a little bit more. And that was fine. That's okay. It's like Robin Hood, you take from the rich and you give to the poor.

Rana Dajani: [00:34:13] But then, I got these smaller organizations coming to me, and saying, can we use the program? And I started along the same thing, okay, you have to pay for it, or then, I say, okay, we'll do a sliding fee, and I think, oh, my God, Rana, wait a minute. It's not about the money. It's not about even surviving as an organization. It's about letting it go. And don't worry, if you let go, everything will happen.

Rana Dajani: [00:34:39] So, it's about shifting where I perceived myself in the universe, and suddenly, because I shifted, I saw a whole new world of opportunity. So, if you want to call that, I hit a wall, because I was following the status quo, and then I realized that the whole framework of how work is done, not just in the non-profit, I think the whole world is wrong, even education, right?

Rana Dajani: [00:35:05] It's all set on a premise of capitalism, of not acknowledging the individuality, not trusting people to figure out things for themselves, and put trust and respect for people to figure out things for themselves, and acknowledging the diversity and beauty, and celebrating the beauty and diversity of humanity, which is fundamentally biology and evolution. Without the diversity, we would not survive.

Rana Dajani: [00:35:31] It's core, yet we don't use it. And so, to me, what happened is, and this realization was kind of stewing and it really reached fruition or whatever during COVID, because I was alone and you took a step back. We all took this kind of global step back of reassessing everything and I felt suddenly liberated, free, because I was not hooked on, I need to get funding or I need to push this forward. I let go of the whole program for free now.

Rana Dajani: [00:36:05] Anybody can take it, and I'm reaching out to people, it's like, take it and let me help you make a difference. So, it's just the shifting of perspective that allowed me to change that challenge, which in some cases could be looked at as something negative. By flipping the question and letting it all go, and now, it became a positive. And you can't imagine the number of partners we found who want to work with us, and take the program and run with it, because of this shift in perspective.

Annalies Corbin: [00:36:34] And that's a beautiful thing, and it's freeing, as you indicated, right? Suddenly, you feel free to go out and do the great work that you always envisioned doing. And I can totally understand and identify with that. I mean, I have been running this organization for 20 some odd years and same sort of iterations around nonprofit. And as a research scientist, not really having a clue, how does the world of business, and industry, and nonprofit work?

Annalies Corbin: [00:36:59] And what do you mean I can't do X, Y, or Z? And so, I do understand the sort of push, and pull, and the tug, and I would agree, I would say for me, say, a similar sort of experience that for better or worse, there was an awful lot of horrible things tied to this global pandemic, but there was a moment of pause. The world did, in fact, have the opportunity to take a giant, and sometimes, step back, maybe just a small one, but we were all forced to take a moment.

Annalies Corbin: [00:37:31] And there is value in a moment sometimes that I think is often not fully understood or actualized. So, I appreciate that. I always like to close the program by recognizing that there are people out there in the world who have spent the half-hour listening to us have this wonderful conversation, and they step back and reflect on what they heard and want to do what you do or they want to tap into the

program that you've developed. So, how does the world go about becoming one with the work that you're doing?

Rana Dajani: [00:38:07] Great. That's a great question. I just want to highlight what you said about COVID. I see the silver lining in what happened and what we're going through. And I think one thing we take home from that is that the impossible is possible. All the excuses that every one, or every organization, or government, or system had put forward has proven that it can change. And to me, this is an opportunity. That's the silver lining that we can change.

Rana Dajani: [00:38:31] And it's all about system change and it's finding those pivotal points, that root cause, because if you change those, you change the whole system. And have the guts, and the confidence, and the courage to do that. And find people like you who can work with you. So, for us at We Love Reading, we ask you first to start by reading. Every day, remember to read, even if it's for 10 minutes.

Rana Dajani: [00:38:51] And then, read for yourself, read for the people around you, the children around you, but always have a book in your bag that you can read. Second for We Love Reading, if you want to join us, you could join us as a We Love Reading ambassador, take our training. The training is online in 10 languages now. And if you have a language that's not there, just help us translate it, and then we can add it.

Rana Dajani: [00:39:10] And then, if you want to help us in terms of volunteering in the work itself, not just the reading aloud to the kids, so if you have some talent in IT, or talent in research, or talent in writing, we invite you to join us and help us. We do a lot of research, by the way, on We Love Reading. So, we don't just depend on the stories, but we do the deep dives to prove our points with researchers as well.

Rana Dajani: [00:39:33] And lastly, if you want to just share your thoughts, share what you think, so we can incorporate that in the philosophy and the thinking. And by the way, we have a new book about We Love Reading, an introduction, that's on our website that you can buy, and read, and share going forward as well. So, we're always open for ideas, thoughts, and reflections. And remember that each one of you, it counts. Your DNA is different from every other human being.

Rana Dajani: [00:40:00] Nobody has the same DNA who has ever lived, will ever come in the future, or lives today. And so, you have a unique thing that you can give to the world. So, find something that you want to change, and go ahead and change it. And it's all about the little steps. That's the butterfly effect. When a butterfly flutters its wings, it moves the air centimeter, there's a change in time and space beyond what you can imagine, but it all starts with those small things. So, have confidence, dream big, trust yourself, and be the change.

Annalies Corbin: [00:40:30] Absolutely. Tap into your passion and take it to the world. So, I love that very much. So, thank you so much for joining us today, spending time, letting us be part of your journey, and sharing your story with us. So, thank you so much.

Rana Dajani: [00:40:44] Thank you. Thank you very much. I learned a lot.

Annalies Corbin: [00:40:47] Likewise. Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media @AnnaliesCorbin, and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.

