

Alex Trembath: Welcome to another episode of Breakthrough Dialogues, the podcast for pragmatists and problem solvers, brought to you by the Breakthrough Institute. I'm Alex Trembath, Communications Director at Breakthrough.

Emma Brush: And I'm Emma Brush, Managing Editor of the Breakthrough Journal. Breakthrough Dialogues invites leading thinkers to talk technological and modern solutions to environmental problems. It's part of our effort to move beyond the tribalism and polarization that too often characterizes environmental thought in politics today. In this episode, we talked to Tisha Schuller, energy and environmental consultant, and former president of the Colorado Oil and Gas Association. Tisha's new book, *Accidentally Adamant*, chronicles her difficult and revealing career straddling the divide between the environmental movement and the oil and gas sector. We talked with Tisha about the tribalism she's faced throughout her career, and some of the ways she's figured out how to move past it.

Alex Trembath: Tisha Schuller, thanks for joining us.

Tisha Schuller: That's my pleasure, thanks for having me.

Alex Trembath: Yeah, of course. So you are a deeply committed environmentalist, and you've worked in the oil and gas sector for decades. Can you start by telling us a little bit about what it's like to have one foot in each of those camps?

Tisha Schuller: Sure. It's my experience that a lot of people that work in the oil and gas industry come from an environmental perspective, because there's so many outdoors people who were attracted to either fishing or hunting or resources development as part of their lifestyle. These are very compatible with working in the oil and gas industry. So it's really just in the external arguments about oil and gas development that you feel a conflict. But when you're within the industry, there are a lot of people that spend their weekends and their vacations in the outdoors in nature.

Alex Trembath: Yeah, and you encountered more of that skepticism towards oil and gas from environmentalists, sort of the more you spent time in oil and gas, particularly once the fracking debate entered the stage, right?

Tisha Schuller: Yeah. So I live in Boulder Country, Colorado, and I was also a skeptical environmentalist about oil and gas before I moved into the industry. And I found myself there kind of accidentally because I was doing

environmental consulting work, and I ended up with clients that were the oil and gas industry. So I really understand. I come from, I lived that perspective of being skeptical about the industry. So when I went and immersed myself by working within the industry and got to know literally thousands of people that work in oil and gas, I was surprised at how much we all have in common and the battles are really superficial in the sense that they're about political ideals in many cases as opposed to fundamental values.

Emma Brush: How do some of these ideals manifest themselves in environmental conversations? How do they get misrepresented? And how does each side misrepresent the other?

Tisha Schuller: Yeah, so most dramatically, in this moment in time, and this built up over time as Alex, you referenced, with the fracking conflicts. But right now, the main overwhelming conflict is around climate change. So the idea that climate needs to be the number one environmental priority, and therefore fossil fuels shouldn't be developed. So this creates two camps. One camp of if you're producing fossil fuels, you're hurting the planet. You're the villain, in many cases. And then on the industry side, this idea that those environmentalists, those others, are trying to shut us down. And there's a real sense that that's a hypocritical perspective, because the industry is producing goods and services — gasoline, jet fuel, plastics, electronics — that consumers require. And not only do they require, they require in a really price-sensitive way. So there's a lot of caricatures of the other side. They really lose the complexity of the fact that we have this whole society that runs essentially off of oil and gas and their byproducts. And so it's worth having a more nuanced conversation.

Emma Brush: So that seems to be one side of the equation. Environmentalists maybe failing to realize how much our entire economy depends on oil and gas, despite a well-recognized need to move beyond that. But what about the other side? How does the oil and gas industry think about environmentalists in a less than generous way?

Tisha Schuller: Yeah, so I think that that's this idea of characterizing them as an other that is also a villain that just wants to shut the industry down. Environmentalism has in many ways been a bad word in the industry, which is why my article in Breakthrough is called "Reclaiming Environmentalism." It's this idea that everyone who takes solace in nature can call themselves an environmentalist. And it doesn't have to be this

caricature of environmentalists as the opposition. And so I think that's the way that environmentalists get oversimplified by the industry.

Alex Trembath: How do you overcome those caricatures? Because they are dominating. What are some of your lessons from straddling those two tribes over the course of your career? What are the lessons you've learned in terms of negotiating across these tribes, and has that changed the way you engage with these groups over time?

Tisha Schuller: So my perspective on this has changed completely. When I first went into the oil and gas industry, my organization graded 30 fact sheets to explain the science of oil and gas and how it's done well and why it's important to society. But in an environment that is so polarized, ultimately, these discussions have to be based on trust and they have to be based on emotion. So there's no conversation of scientific facts that's going to create common ground between people who are opposed to oil and gas development, and people that want to continue with its production. So I do a lot of teaching within the industry of how to engage with public and communities.

The first one is simply to listen. When communities have concerns, or a citizen has concerns about the oil and gas industry, the most important thing is to give them a place to talk about it. To explain what they're afraid of. And for those people in the industry to really think about and understand, where do their fears come from? Will I have those fears? What would help me understand?

So we're looking to create trust, we're looking to create individual relationships, and that's how you begin to bridge the divides. On the flip side, if I'm speaking in a community that's trying to reconcile oil and gas development with their fears and values, there's a huge important part of understanding how our society uses oil and gas. And for people to say, okay, I take responsibility for my piece in this. I take responsibility for consuming, and now, I want to demand that this is produced responsibly. So those are ways that you can tip toe towards conversations that ultimately have to be conducted in trust and in relationship.

Alex Trembath: Yeah, I think a lot of listeners would be surprised to hear about an environmentalism that sort of springs from direct experience in oil and gas. But in your essay, and in your book, you really kind of make that case that we can think about environmental goals, policies, ideals, basically

from the world that we live in today, which is extremely dependent on oil and gas and other fossil fuels and other natural resources. So can you talk a little bit more about why what you've learned in the oil and gas and natural resources industry has given you a new way to think about keys to effective actionable environmentalism?

Tisha Schuller:

Yeah, absolutely. So the first thing, in terms of action, or wanting to get things done that protect the environment. If one has an unrealistic world view, for example, we need to get off all fossil fuels immediately. If you have an unrealistic world view, then you don't actually have the opportunity to work towards pragmatic changes. So action ultimately is going to be incremental. It's going to have a lot of stakeholders around the table. And it's going to require compromise. And so it's really important that environmentalists that want to see change in the world, and I am one of them, are able to work in this patient and incremental and pragmatic way. So that's one thing. The second is more personal. Which is that each of us often approach our environmentalism from our political tribes. And so political tribe says, okay, we are anti-fossil fuel. We are anti-fracking. We are anti-fossil fuels, or GMOs and nuclear.

But actually, those big picture camps aren't gonna help us get anything done. Because to advance our interests, we have to build coalitions that are bigger than us and our tribes. So one thing we can do as environmentalists is look at the science and be willing, perpetually, to evolve our thinking, change our mind, and create alliances with people that are different from us. So my passion, really, is that if we want to change the world, we have to create these tents that are big and that will let everyone in and we find common ground and we move forward on the things that we can agree on.

Alex Trembath:

But as you said earlier, it's so very rarely facts and science that sway people. You've been talking in this conversation, so far, about how appropriately emotional and tribal a lot of these associations and a lot of our visions of the future are. So I agree that a perspective based on science and a perspective based on evidence should be and must be a part of an effective environmentalism. So how can we use science, or evidence-based policy making or whatever, to overcome these tribal differences?

Tisha Schuller:

Yeah, so the really big issues on the environmental side addressing climate change, on the oil and gas side, building trust and rapport with communities. These really big issues will not be addressed in big campaigns. So it is my working hypothesis that we essentially need an

assembly of individuals willing to do the work within themselves, and then ultimately with others, to advance interests.

So for example, I do a lot of work in and around the oil and gas industry. And because I believe that climate change is happening and caused by humans, an important thing we must address, I can make advances in the work that I do because I have relationship rapport and trust with people within the industry who are making decisions on behalf of their companies.

But this is tiny and baby steps and would be rather unsatisfying if I didn't believe that there are hundreds of us doing this work throughout. In fact, what drew me to the Breakthrough Institute was to find a whole world of people who are interested in doing the work themselves, understanding these issues, finding other people who are different, and then working in our own slow way. It's unsatisfying in that we all want an urgent change, but I believe that incrementalism and baby steps and pragmatic compromise are the way, ultimately, we're gonna see these sea changes happen.

Alex Trembath: Yeah, it won't surprise you that the recommendation to seek out folks with a different perspective or a different set of values and engage in sort of honest agreement or honest disagreement with those folks is often the first most important step in bridging these divides. I think that is a really important insight.

Emma Brush: Another one that I find kind of fascinating is that the way that science plays into these conversations is not deployed to convince others, but from what you're saying, Tisha, it sounds like it's really... you want to expose yourself to science to allow for the possibility that you might change your mind. So it's really kind of like a personal process of engagement.

Tisha Schuller: Absolutely. So because I find myself speaking to both what I'll generically characterize as environmental audiences, say a class here at CU Boulder. Or I find myself presenting to a trade association meeting in Pittsburgh, say. The approach I take is the same, although the language I use is different, which is to seek to understand their world view and their perspective. And then I articulate how I have come to understand and change. And then allow them to actually change me with their perspective. If I'm in conversation, my objective is not to change their mind, it's to make a connection. And then also, if I ever were to be successful changing their

mind, it would be because I was also willing to be informed and changed by them. So we personally have to be very dynamic. If we want to be a part of changing the world, it's going to change us as well.

Emma Brush: Yeah, I find that inspiring. And obviously difficult work, but, it sounds like you've had some success with it in your own professional endeavors.

Tisha Schuller: It's really interesting. When I go into a CU Boulder class and they give my bio, it's often an environmental studies class, the room is hostile. I mean arms crossed, eyes narrowed. And in about 45 minutes the feeling, the ice in the room melts, and it melts because I'm not trying to change their mind. I'm trying to create a rapport, and I'm also inviting them to educate me.

And in the end, I think it really shifts a dynamic and it's not actually any different when I speak to an industry audience and usually they want to introduce me as, she's the environmental activist that started her career opposing the first Gulf War. That's the same thing. The arms are crossed, the eyes are narrowed, and they think, what fruitcake brought her in to talk to us?

But it's the same thing. And so I do tell anyone I speak to, our job is not to change minds. Our job is to create rapport and be out in the world looking for common ground, forward progress, and solutions. Whether it's climate change or community conflict, we don't know what those solutions are. We just know that if we're in relationship working toward common goals, we're gonna make progress. And the progress is gonna look different than what any of us could imagine as individuals. Because collectively, we truly can do more, and I've lived that for the last seven years. So I have a lot of confidence in the process.

Emma Brush: Awesome. Well Tisha, I also wanna take one step back. Because in your book, you spend a good amount of time discussing some of these challenges, but also, your own personal professional challenges that came with working as a woman leader in a male dominated environment. Which is true of the oil and gas industry; it's also true of STEM more broadly. So can you tell us a bit about some of those experiences and what you learned from them? What advice you might offer for others?

Tisha Schuller: Yeah, people are often surprised because even when I worked in environmental consulting, I was the only and first office manager among

50 office managers that was a woman. And then later, the only regional manager in any level of upper management in my environmental consulting firm. So even in environmental consulting, it's an interesting situation to be in. And the experience of my generation, I'm mid career, is that there are just simply different rules to be successful as a woman in a male dominated environment.

And that's not to say that it's unfair. I just think it's important that each of us recognize that we have to find the right balance between confidence and humility, and bringing the gifts that every woman brings to a leadership role. Balancing those two things. We can't do it like our mentors have done. We have to find our own way, and it has to be authentic. But we bring different skills. We bring more relationship skills, more ability to bring people along. And so finding my own style has been really important.

The second thing I'll say, as a woman who's often been the only woman at the table, is it easy to take to start getting used to that. And then when other women come along, often it's very difficult. Like the woman mentoring chain is challenging. And so I made a commitment two decades ago to be relentlessly supportive of other women. To want to fill every table that I have a seat at with as many other woman as possible. And that takes a real commitment and a constant effort. And the thing is the next generation has more opportunities and experiences. This is something that we really have to continue to thrive together and create opportunities for each other.

Emma Brush: Are there additional structural barriers at hand, though? That still would prevent bringing more women to the table, do you think? From your experience?

Tisha Schuller: Yeah. As unpopular as it might be to say in the industries I work in, there's just structural sexism. Any environment that's dominated 80 or 90% by one gender is going to be very difficult for the other gender, period. And so my approach to that is yeah, that's just the way it is. So it's our job as first movers into these worlds to create room for the generations that come after us. And that's the way I think about it.

On the other hand, there's some serious advantages. When I speak to a conference, nobody forgets. Because I'm the only woman speaker. They don't forget me. And so it is easier to make, there are some advantages in

that way to make an impression, to be memorable. And so we have to enjoy what we can that gives us an advantage.

Alex Trembath:

Yeah, so, both as a woman leader in a male dominated field and as someone trying to bridge this divide, this really, increasingly sort of bitter divide between industry and between environmentalists, I have to push you on sort of where your confidence comes from. In your essay in your book, you detail quite a bit of pushback from your own community and from the broader environmental community as well as we've been talking about. As well as sort of a refusal from many folks in the industry to find common ground with the environmental community. Can you tell us a little bit more about the pushback that you've gotten, and what gives you the inspiration and confidence to overcome it?

Tisha Schuller:

Yeah, I imagine that every listener of the Breakthrough podcast can relate to that lonely position in the middle where you have very few allies other than your other Breakthrough friends, because that is a common experience. And so one thing I do is incessantly ask myself, is this a bias? Is this position coming from tribal thinking? Am I handling this well? Am I treating others with respect? So I have many times a day an assessment of myself. So that's part of it, is that when I do have to speak on the world, sometimes in front of hundreds of people, I have to ask myself, am I speaking truth as I know it today? And I also have to speak with humility, because if you're committed to science and changing your mind, there's a good chance I'm going to show up next year and have to amend my thoughts. Or in the case of my book, I fully expect that readers are gonna say, oh, you got this wrong. And here's why. And I'll learn, and I'll grow, and I'll change from that. So part of it is just being committed to checking yourself.

But then, the problem I found myself in in my job in the industry was I had so many critics. That you could spend all your time facing critiques. So at some point you have to be selective. And what I did was come up with a trusted group of mentors that I would go to. And they would tell me when I was wrong, and my job was then to accept it. And to say, okay, when my mentors tell me I got this wrong, I'm gonna really return to soul searching. So there's a balance of self-discovery and self-critique, and then at some point saying, I'm doing the best I can, and I may be getting it wrong, but I'm gonna get out there and make progress.



Alex Trembath:

That is such an important way to live an intellectually honest life. To constantly, literally constantly, many many times throughout any given day, be asking ourselves, is this opinion? Is this perspective sourced in bias? Is this perspective sourced in a lack of information or a misunderstanding of information? I think we all like to think we've gotten pretty confident in our opinions, whether it be about climate change or technology or the economy or whatever. But constantly checking and reminding ourselves that we have changed our minds before, that we've been wrong before, and that other people with different perspectives might disagree with us, and neither of us is exactly wrong, and it's important to bridge those different perspectives. I think that's so important. But also, what you said about being very honest with your audience and trying not to make assumptions about people based on their background or their perspective. So how do you go about doing that? What kind of assumptions do you think people tend to make about folks from other tribes, and how can we set those aside?

Tisha Schuller:

Yeah, such good questions. And two things come to mind. The first is, I think I should have an honorary PhD in behavioral economics because I have spent so much time trying to understand biases. And it's nice, because a lot of the people I speak to are scientists and engineers, so I show them scientific data that they have biases, and then I show them scientific data that they don't believe they have biases because that's one of our great biases. And that actually really can soften up a room in a conversation as like, we kind of have to start at this humble basis that all of us, including me, their speaker, is coming from a perspective of which we are unconscious.

So that's a huge baseline understanding, and we could all understand the rest of our lives studying those and becoming better for it. The second thing that you alluded to is this idea of translating. And the only way that you can translate between different worldviews is to be listening. So to be listening to their language, where they're coming from, they may be saying the exact same things as someone from another perspective, but they're using very different words.

And one of the things I have to check myself on perpetually is I can chameleon pretty easily. So put me in the middle of west Texas and I'll have an accent in like four minutes. Then put me in the middle of Boulder and I swear somehow, you know, renewable coffee cup and a bicycle are in my hand. I can really move between these groups. So I have to check myself to

say I'm using different words, different body language, but am I staying true to my message, and not morphing into the people that I'm speaking with? And so this is part of the challenge of our own self discovery. Is if we're going to cross the divide, which I hope we all do, everyone listening does, we have to keep coming back to what's true to me, what's true to me. And what I found is even in a big audience, I can say, I'm gonna tell you something you don't want to hear. But if I say it with this grounded humility, people go, okay, yeah, I didn't want to hear that. Or I don't buy that, I don't agree with that. But we aren't in conflict. I'm just stating what is true as I know it.

Alex Trembath: Yeah, honestly, I relate pretty deeply to that. Having tried at least to expose myself to a bunch of different political ideology, a bunch of different professional backgrounds. And you do sort of end up code switching a little bit depending on where whoever you're talking to is coming from. Whether they're coming from the left, or from the right, or from industry, or from activism, or from wherever. And honestly, I think it makes life more interesting in addition to, I think, being politically pragmatic and to being hopefully effective in terms of building coalitions. I just find it rather enriching to be able to talk to you, coming from the oil and gas sector, and then hopefully at the same event, or some other time, talk to someone who is deeply committed to getting us off of oil and gas as quickly as possible and thinking about how these perspectives, these imperatives, these values, can all share a space and share a common conversation. It's honestly a lot more intellectually interesting than an echo chamber.

Tisha Schuller: Absolutely. And one of the things that really empowers is that if you walk into this group or other, and you don't think you have to change anyone's mind. Your only job is to be a student, understand the language, understand the perspective, understand where they came from. An ironically, those create the conditions for changing people's minds. But you're not required. You're not required to go anywhere and change anyone's mind. You just need to build bridges of rapport.

Alex Trembath: Yeah. And with that in mind, I'm curious, maybe outside of oil and gas and environmentalism, what's an example of that rapport you see in the world? We like to ask our guests what an example of progress they see in the world is.

Tisha Schuller: Yeah, one thing I'm really excited about is there was a lot of disconnect about the idea of energizing the developing world. So this idea that we're going to bring energy to people around the world. And the discussion has been limited to these really isolated incidents of windmills or solar lanterns. And I'm really excited in a lot of the environments that I'm working in now, people are talking about energy development at scale and urban environments. And I am super jazzed about that, because I think a billion people getting raised out of poverty should be our global priority. And I feel more optimistic than I ever have about that.

Alex Trembath: I have to agree. And can you tell us what your story is in six words, Tisha?

Tisha Schuller: I can. Serve with love, change mind often. And if you'll give me three bonus words, it would be drink great beer. (laughing)

Alex Trembath: Well, with that, I want to promise to actually take you up on your offer to come to Colorado and share some great beer with you. But until then, thank you so much for joining us, Tisha.

Tisha Schuller: Oh, it's always a pleasure. I love the work you do. Thanks to both of you.

Alex Trembath: That's it for this episode of Breakthrough Dialogues. If you like our show, tell your friends. Rate us on iTunes and subscribe on whatever platform you get your podcasts. We want to again thank our guest Tisha. Our producers are Alyssa Codamon and Tali Perelman. Until next time, I'm Alex Trembath.

Emma Brush: And I'm Emma Brush.

Alex Trembath: Thanks for tuning in.