

Episode 11 Sisu and Gentle Power

Length of recording: 40 minutes

Transcription notes

GB:	Gautam Basu
EL:	Emilia Elisabet Lahti
S:	Speaker(s)
wo-	an unfinished word
(word)	an uncertain passage in speech or an unrecognized speaker
(-)	an unrecognizable word
(--)	unrecognizable words
[pause 10 s]	a pause in speech of at least 10 seconds
, . ? :	a grammatically correct punctuation mark or a pause in speech of less than 10 seconds

[intro music]

S: The Operations Leadership podcast with Gautam Basu provides insights for today's business leaders on creating value through operations improvement, process excellence, digital innovation, and organizational leadership.

GB: Our guest for this episode of the Operations Leadership podcast is Dr Emilia Elisabet Lahti. She is an author, speaker and trainer who pioneered the research on the Finnish construct known as Sisu which is all about courage, determination and fortitude in the face of adversity. This is a useful skill for all global operations and business leaders and she recently published a book called Gentle Power which is about the higher octane version of Sisu. We hope you enjoy this conversation and if you like what you're hearing, please hit the subscribe button. Enjoy.

[music stops]

GB: Welcome Elisabet to the Operations Leadership podcast. You are primarily known for pioneering the research on the ancient Finnish construct of Sisu, which denotes determination and fortitude in the face of extreme adversity. Could you tell us a little bit more about this unique concept and how you stumbled upon it back in 2012 when you began to research it?

EL: Thank you so much and it's really an honor to be here, to have this conversation. I think the concept for this research was kind of similar to what

usually some of the best ideas or most needed inventions maybe are. So it came from an actual necessity. I was going through my own personal tragedy at the time and I really needed to understand how humans overcome extreme adversity. That was really one of the guiding questions I had in the beginning was where do we unearth this strength? Who overcomes? Who survives and who doesn't? And what can we learn from those people who have been able to endure and who haven't. After all adversities are everywhere, no one can really avoid them. I was also curious whether there's a way to even learn to harness adversity for some kind of growth. Of course with enough time and enough resources and those-, so that was the beginning point for my journey and it really has taken me on a great adventure as I have been learning about myself and I managed to find new grounding for my own feet and then produce research as I've gone along the way. So when Sisu came to my mind was, I was visiting the University of Pennsylvania and I had just gone through this career transition and I left the previous job that I had for a very long time, the service of the Finnish Foreign Service. So I was in New York working for the Finnish consulate and I felt this deep inner (-) to do something, to have more meaning for the work that I was doing. And I went to visit the University of Pennsylvania to decide whether I would apply for their Master's in Applied Positive Psychology program that was founded by Martin Seligman quite a while back. Serendipitously I happen to stumble into a lecture hall where Angela Duckworth, a very well known researcher of Grit, which is passion and perseverance for a long term goal. So it's a sister concept of Sisu but not the same thing. She was speaking of Grit and I was sitting at the back of the room, kind of trying to hide there which was full of undergrads. I'm not even sure if I was supposed to be in that room or not but I snuck in. Her lecture made me think of Sisu, this concept from my own native land. Sisu is something that most Finns know about but it's kind of like the air that we breathe. It's part of our daily routines and back in the day I noticed that there was no research to describe what Sisu is, there were no peer-reviewed articles, books existed but they were more based on personal anecdotes and stories of Sisu. So I became very curious to ask the questions, what is Sisu? Is it just a myth? Does it even exist? Is it just a story that Finnish people tell and then if it does, is it something that could benefit people in their ordinary lives when we face adversity and trouble, what applications could it have for example for leadership and all these things that really influence our lives. That became the beginning for first doing the Masters at Applied Positive Psychology, doing my first graduate work under the supervision of Angela Duckworth actually. So I had the great luck, she offered to advise me. She really made a huge contribution to my life by being such a beautiful example of leadership and taking action. Eventually the road led me to work on PhD on the topic, so I really decided to go all the way and I have to say that it required me to do so because even though the word itself might look very modest, four letters, S I S U, but it really hides a world within it. And especially when we take Sisu as this-, as you said so well, it's determination and this fortitude in the face of extreme adversity. So it really becomes alive in those lived moments when it becomes much more than a concept and an idea. But where our life might depend

on is the ability to dig deep and ground into this what I could also call the fire in the belly, the ability to be really (-) it and we all have this capacity. So it's akin to life-force. It is something that will not let us perish and die. This place and this time where the world is right now, it almost to me sometimes feels like we are in this collective empirical experiment of Sisu where these events really touch everyone in some way or the other. I am very curious to see how Sisu can be applied to daily life and I think that's a good little beginning for Sisu.

GB: Yea, and thinking about the applications, I actually witnessed your Doctoral defense here at Aalto university. You had a little incident there. For normal people I guess that would throw them off, so could you tell us a little bit about what happened mid-way through your defense at your Doctoral?

EL: Well, I consider myself a normal person but I think I've had the luck to really practice my Sisu and that tells about this quality of Sisu that is something that we can train. So I've been really living and breathing this concept throughout the research that I did which involved quite a lot of things. I'll get back to your question, I'm gonna do a little diversion here. One of the ways I decided to go into Sisu was because I realized that just doing a (survey) even though it gave a beautiful foundation for mapping the construct where we didn't have any preexisting information about what it is. So it laid a foundation but then I pretty soon realized that to really go inside the fibers of this elusive concept, I needed to somehow go deeper and it was pretty hard to design an experiment where you'd impose people in a situation where they have to tap into their Sisu. I wonder if you would even get a review board approval for such an exam to put people into a burning house or something like that. So I decided to use myself, become the laboratory of one. I used autoethnography as my research framework and phenomenology and I approached this topic through my own life. So one of the field experiments that I designed was to run the length of New Zealand and I trained for it for two years, I was not an ultra runner before that. So that in itself was truly a test of Sisu and it was my wish that when I put myself in a situation like that, it will strip me so bare from all these preconceptions of myself and ego and these things that we put on that I could see more of myself and how do I perform in a situation of high pressure and extreme where I have to respond, where I feel like I've nothing left. That's really one of the essences of Sisu that when we feel we have nothing left to give and yet we stay with the task. We find that there's almost this extra power engine or some kind of a fuel tank that activates. That really is the core of Sisu. Another thing was, I went to study Kung-Fu in China to impose another kind of challenge to myself. So I had been doing all these things. By the time I got to the Doctoral defense and this very surprising thing happened with the fire alarm, it went off, maybe an hour into the defense. I was kind of prepared for anything and I have to say, to thank my beautiful supervisor Essa Saarinen from Aalto University who prepared me and said that, one of the principles he gave me was, no matter what happens, stay cool. And that was on my mind and it also speaks to this quality of Sisu that we can help

each other cultivate that through leading by example, showing a positive example and such. So deep down inside, I have to say that I was almost a little bit-, I thought like yeah! It felt like I could show and embody the Sisu that I have been training so that it's not only in my concepts and in my research paper but how do I really act when the situation calls for it. And that's the ultimate, the pinnacle where we are called to move and that's a lifelong journey. As much as I succeed, I take a step backward sometimes and I fall on my face but that's just to give information where I need to work on myself and go gently with that path through.

GB: Yea, witnessing it was pretty impressive, I don't know how I would have done in the same circumstance. Kudos for handling that so wonderfully. How you described Sisu, it almost sounds too good to be true. But I'm just curious, what are the downsides of Sisu? We kind of understand that fortitude in the face of extreme adversity, that's a good thing but in your research, have you noticed any of the downsides of this trait, Sisu?

EL: That's a really great and an important question. There are no miracle drugs and certainly Sisu is not one. Whenever I speak of Sisu, when I give lectures or talks, I always bring out the side that, just as much as Sisu can be this really powerful engine, just like a rocket engine that pushes the rocket above the earth's atmosphere, there's a huge amount of power there. At the same time, Sisu can become the thing that leads us to failure if we don't know how to use it correctly or if we use it too much, maybe for extended periods of time. Just like the rocket, it has to drop that engine that gets it through that tough period. So Sisu is a place where we visit, it's not a place to spend all our time because it is time consuming. One could even say that, when we are dealing with those super extreme moments, we borrow Sisu from our bodies because it is an embodied quality. I don't know if you knew about the word Sisu originally from the word (sisus), which means the interior or the insides. It denotes-, it could be translated as guts quite literally. So when we take it out, we must also put it back so that we don't over-consume ourselves and deplete ourselves. When I was doing the initial research on Sisu, the survey that I made had over thousand people who responded and I did a thematic analysis on this and one of the clear findings was that, Sisu was not only a positive quality and I think for a lot of Finns it's pretty self-evident, we know that. But I saw that there was a difference between the respondents who were Finnish-Americans who knew what Sisu was and they also responded. To them Sisu is often displayed as nearly only a positive quality. But there are three types of harm that Sisu can cause; one of them is harm to the person himself/herself where if we express or we use too much Sisu, we are in danger of over-consuming ourselves, ending with burnout, getting into accidents, we take risks and are (--) [14:00] foolish. So with everything there needs to be a balance, secondly and I think this is always worth highlighting is that, there's harm to our environment when we expand or express too much Sisu. We might become merciless to other people because if we have a lot of Sisu and we don't cultivate it in a way that it makes it a balance quality, we are in risk of imposing those very harsh standards

that have led us to achieve what we wanted and we expect everyone else to perform the same way. So we forget the human element and we are in risk of jeopardizing psychological safety, we break the trust and people just don't work like that. No one wants to be pushed and forced into their best and especially when we are going through tough things. There were some of the responses I saw, one of them said that people with too much Sisu are really difficult to work with in teams. So in leadership, those leaders who express this kind of harsh Sisu and it's too much, they really actually risk the performance of the team. So again, Sisu can be this quality that pushes and helps us to achieve our most incredible performance and it can also be the one that leads to not getting there. So I speak of the shadow of the Sisu as well. And the third thing is; when Sisu is not also based in reason, in our capacity to stay open to the environment and constantly feel and see what is happening and tuning to it, we risk becoming very stubborn, so it will impair our decision making and we will end up going almost like with having-

GB: Blinders

EL: Blinders, exactly, thank you. So Sisu is something to kind of take very seriously in that sense that when we spend enough time and we commit to this path of Sisu, to cultivate leadership through that, it can help us develop excellence in whatever we do but also we don't do that and we simply blindly go into it, we risk causing harm. It's a lifelong task really for anyone who goes on it.

GB: So there has to be an equilibrium in terms of the bad or the downsides of Sisu and the positive if I understood you correctly.

EL: (-)

GB: Great. As this is an operations leadership podcast, we talk a lot about operations management and specifically supply chain management. Maybe you're aware that there have been some disruptions or some difficulties or challenges facing global supply chains and you know especially around disruptions where it's the geopolitical conflict in the Ukraine that's currently going on, economy inflation, regulatory legal environments and so on and so forth. So how would you say Sisu is relevant to operations leaders and how can they use Sisu to kind of push their organizations and self leadership, organizational leadership, do you have any kind of advice or recommendations for these operational leaders based on what's going on?

EL: Considering that supply chains are really what either make or break a business or any system for that matter, and then when we are in time of disruptions like we are and the chaos of course this becomes even more demanding and challenging, so one is the leader and the person expressing that making the calls is required to work under extreme pressure sometimes and our decision making

or skills or leadership really becomes under a test. And Sisu is about performing under pressure, so this really is the domain of Sisu to understand that. As we know and as we have discussed too, that the inter-temporal time horizons with leadership, we have strategy, we have tactics. Strategy being the long term, one year to five years if I've understood correctly. Tactical up to around a year and half, one could say that these are kind of the domain of grit which is, if one wants to make comparison like this, so grit is putting the hard work in, day in day out, having a goal that has been set and then taking all the required actions to actually get there. So it's a longer time-span. When we get to the point of operational leadership, which is the immediate action, sometimes extremely immediate especially when a system has been disrupted so then we have to be able to make decisions quickly, have a clear mind, have a very sharp focus and now we are really entering the zone and the space of Sisu. And there was a Canadian social psychologist called Elliott Jaques and he wrote that just like people differ in their intelligence, they differ in their time-span and the ability to endure longer or shorter time spans, he called it time-span discretion if I remember it correctly. And in the same way, some leaders might be really good with this longer time-span, the strategic, the tactical and then when they get into the point where the pressure is extremely high, they might not perform so well. So in those situations, we really get, we benefit from cultivating this ability for Sisu because it does test us. That's why I'm not so afraid of adversities anymore because I kind of from my own background with a bit of martial arts, I like to think of the whole world as a Dojo and that invites curiosity to what I do, it allows me to witness the people that I work with, the adversities, anything that comes my way, events, failures, triumphs, as something that I can learn from. Especially the adversities which shake me a little bit and rock my focus, it's nothing to be sad about or disappointed with myself. It simply gives me data and information that, okay, that's where I have a bit of a soft spot or weak spot, maybe I need to slow down, maybe I need to bring in more of my breathing practices or something. And that's one of the ways to develop Sisu to really preamp these disruptions and these situations. I might even say that, for operational excellence, one must have Sisu. And because these supply chains, I mean they are run by humans, so ultimately our excellence in operational leadership, that is what really breaks or makes the supply chains and operational leadership.

GB: Yea, it's very interesting how you mention this strategic tactical and operation execution timelines because I think that's the bridge between this construct of Sisu and operations management, especially operations leadership so I find that very interesting. You also mentioned about the martial arts which we share a love for as well. It's really interesting and I think that's something that operation leaders can take away from this discussion. You wrote a book, gentle power and it will be out on January 24th and this is kind of the continuation of your research on Sisu. Could you tell us a little bit more about this concept of gentle power and what are the benefits of leveraging gentle power and how it might differ or be very similar to this construct of Sisu?

EL: So gentle power is the high expression of Sisu. It answers or invites a question, not just what we do but it's about how we do what we do. The vantage point where I am and how I'm looking at the world. I'm always looking for applications and when I've seen myself use Sisu and when I witness Sisu around me and being very aware of the potential upsides and the benefit of Sisu and also seeing the possible downsides and understanding that what I also spoke about in my desertion a lot that Sisu needs to be grounded into a practice that allows it to transmute or be used in a way that is beneficial, is constructive, especially on the long term coz there's always a cost when we go to the red zone and we burn ourselves or the people around us. So gentle power is first and foremost an invitation for that and currently we are in a place where we do a lot of research. We understand and know from research the benefits of compassion leadership, we know that it influences the company turnover, people have less sick-leaves, there's even been a co-relation or connection to employee health in terms of heart disease and when people do better when we have taken care of psychological safety, we know that is connected to innovation, it's creativity. Harvard researcher Amy Edmondson, she's a really wonderful person to look into. So she's been pioneering the research on psychological safety for a long time now. I think she began her research with researching medical errors and what she found was that those errors happened when there was not enough trust in teams or there was a fear of expressing that something might be wrong so anytime in a boardroom when the kind of safe space has been created where psychological safety isn't present, people might not express what they would want to share and that can lead to all kinds of troubles. Thinking of pilots for example, they have been researching the black boxes, so that's a very classic example. So gentle power is not just something great nice to have, it's really an necessity because of how just evolutionarily the human brain has developed and when we experience trust and what Barbara Fredrikson has researched in positive emotions, we are actually able to express or get in touch with more of a cognitive abilities when we are feeling relaxed instead of being tensed and afraid. So gentle power is an invitation to start developing Sisu in a positive way, in our daily lives and in our leadership. In this book I do really speak about leadership in terms of everyday leadership as well. That it's not just for a selected group of people but it's for every single human because we all lead when we come to a space and we have an impact whether we want it or not and I think now or ever really is the time to acknowledge that and have these conversations about what is power. To some people it's a very scary word but at the same time if we are not aware of it, if we are afraid of it, someone will take it and use it for us so the book is also an invitation to have those difficult conversations within ourselves and then also expand that to a broader domain.

GB: Yea it's interesting because when you think about the word or words "Gentle Power", can it be misconstrued or taken as weakness or passivity, especially in the business world where you have earnings and there's deadlines and people push to get things done. So how do you see specifically in the business world

where gentle power could be kind of misunderstood to be weak or passive. What do you say about that?

EL: Yes it can be and it sure has been misconstrued as weakness or passivity, which is a grave mistake. Simply just based on this sheer amount of research that really already has hit the shore of our understanding of what the benefits are to combining what in the eastern tradition could be called the yin and the yang, so yin being the soft side. The softer skills of communication, the psychological safety, all these things that we bring which is the human element, because we are not only leading supply chains as this abstract concept or systems but they all involve humans. So bringing gentle power is bringing in the human to the element. And the yang side, which is the tough, the hard, so the invitation is to bring both of those two. There's a French philosopher, was, called Anne Dufourmantelle, who I mention in the book as well and she said beautifully that gentleness invites an expanded present and to me that denotes this kind of idea that when we are relaxed and we can be extremely tough and high performing but keeping that relaxed body, like in martial arts, the invitation is to at all times have the body be relaxed and then the performance actually comes almost through you, the energy, but if the person is tensed the energy doesn't move. So the same principle could be seen to apply to this domain and this idea of gentle power that when we are relaxed we're able to literally perceive, we have a wider vision field. Based on some research with Fredrikson on soccer players, so there's some huge benefit to learning, to stay soft and there's an invitation also to have a conversation where around this that why do we feel such an aversion toward softness, kindness, love where these things are the base elements of all human life. Everything is at the end of the day enveloped in those topics. I would say that it's a sign of intelligence, a sign of maturity to not be afraid of either of these concepts, not the gentleness, not the power but really bring them together. I do remember an anecdote from the time when I was in China studying Kung-Fu which was part of the research and just part of my own personal practice too. And I saw some these teachers who were there, really hard-faced men, warrior monks in generations and generations and the ones out of all those teachers who were I would say the most skilled or mature or how would I say-, most accomplished, were the ones that they also had this undertone of softness and friendliness and a bit of humor all the time. They didn't need to try to push themselves or prove themselves and to me that spoke a lot about this power of gentleness as well.

GB: Yea it's interesting, it reminds me of what Bruce Lee used to say about water analogy coz if you're too hard, you'll become brittle and you break so being kind of flowing like water it's good. So I do understand that, it's very interesting that you mentioned these concepts. Maybe moving on, gentle power sounds really interesting, so what are some tangible steps where one can harness their own gentle power?

EL: I get this question often and also in terms of Sisu and what I want to contribute maybe in this moment is to simplify it and just bring in the awareness of the idea that there's so much knowledge right now. All the information is out there. We basically don't need more research on how to grow, how to mature, how to develop meta cognitive skills and all these. So it really comes down to execution.

GB: Operations [laughs]

EL: Operations exactly [laughs]. I know that you have decades of experience in martial arts. So this would resonate with you because the only way to get any results or have a change or growth is through relentless, committed, consistent practice. So this book first and foremost really (--) [32:01] invites a conversation around this topic of gentleness and power. At the end of the book there is an invitation to form a daily practice coz we can listen to hundreds of hours of podcast, devour books, do PhD research or learn about these matters. If we don't put them to action, nothing will change and this book will not help and neither does anything else. So the tangible step towards developing gentle power is, number one is to find the information to understand and see if it is for you. I would say that gentle power is required by everyone but not everyone will be willing to do it because it will require inner work, it's not going to be easy. Then when these goals have been set, then establish a daily practice and really commit to it and this doesn't need to be anything super difficult. On the contrary, it needs to be something that is specific to the individual, it can be simple, I would say even if we choose a simple thing as learning how to breathe which might be a surprising answer to this part to some. But when we are able to calm down our nervous system, tap into that parasympathetic nervous system, which is our rest and digest. Which again opens that expanded presence, it allows us to use our cognitive skills when we come from the place of rest and ease, we make better decisions, we are able to stay present and focus under extreme pressure. So this is very key to Sisu, being able to have emotion regulation and thus also be able to discern. Do not move too fast, stay calm. That was the key to me, not getting upset and not losing my track with my doctoral defense. When we did have to evacuate from the building and go outside and place my laptop there, reconnect again and then just connect from where we were left. The only way for me to do that was that I practice meditation, I practice breathing, so I'm constantly looking for ways to hard-wire my body for gentle power. So if that's the path, then really committing to the practice of it and there really is no shortcut in that sense. And while saying this, it's important to remember to be gentle with one's self as well because it's truly a lifelong process to learn these skills as I saw from the Kung-Fu masters in China and my Aikido teacher for example. So it's not something we do for a short time but remaining persistent and patient and gentle to ourselves and yet tapping into both the ying and the yang in us.

GB: it's really interesting because I definitely resonate with your views on the daily practice because as you said, listening to podcast, reading books it's in a way a

form of procrastination in the sense that actually doing it, applying it, practically to your daily life, then you mentioned breathwork and meditation, which is kind of maybe considered woo woo and in certain circles with hardcore business world. But at the end of the day being a practitioner myself, they do work because I think you're alluding to it that through relaxation you'll gain power. And this is any martial artist, any combat sports athlete will agree that if you're relaxed in there you're moving, you're flowing, that's where the true power comes. So I definitely agree with that. You write in your book that gentle power is the future of leadership. So what do you mean by this and why is it so crucial?

EL: I would say that we are past the point where Sisu or gentle power, gentle power as the invitation to do the work, to balance are the soft and the hard-, to do the work, to have the conversation around power, what it is, to develop operational excellence and these things, we're past the point that it's nice thing to have. it's a necessity, we need it, our world needs it. And it's an invitation to us as humans to really start to consciously develop what's best in us. There's in this book's cover, I do love that we used the Japanese idea of kintsugi, or kintsukuroi, I think it's another word. So there's little gold here in the seams and that's the metaphor for gentle power as well that we may have broken systems, leadership to some extent, we can see the results of it now in this time and age. So when we take what's most precious in us, which is our willingness to commit to long term processes and progress with ourselves. Even Though it's going to be tough at times, and we are willing to also keep our heart open if one might say so and that is the expanded present what Anne Duforemantale talks about, which means that our parasympathetic nervous systems activated we're able to also meet each other at the human level, which is sometimes really hard, it's really, it's really easier to close the heart. I remember my aikido teacher once saying before class that, it's easy to be clever, it's much harder to be loving and caring. And so bringing that element is the gold and kintsugi means to mend with gold. So in that tradition, when a vase or an item is broken, it's not discarded and thrown away but it is fixed and mended using gold in the seams. So that's the invitation of this book and the circle closing as far as for the PhD research for me. So I'm going into new research topics now, but that was the main and the biggest outcome of that is that, Sisu is great but gentleness and gentle power is greatness, I would say that.

GB: Wow. This has been excellent and fascinating and very insightful. I wanna thank you Elisabet for your time. For those who've, the people in our audience that wanna learn more about Sisu, gentle power, how can they learn more, how do they get in touch, could you elaborate on that?

EL: Yea, just sisulab.com, everything is there.

GB: Alright. Thank you so much for your time.

EL: Thank you.

[*outro music starts*]

GB: That's it for this week's Operational Leadership podcast, I'm your host Gautam Basu. If you like what you're listening to on this podcast series, then please hit subscribe and until next time.

[*outro music ends*]