Episode 12: Learning to speak up about the small things with behavioral scientist Dr Gina Merchant

**Gina:** I just was staring down the salary trajectory and I got really nervous. I had a lot of student loans and obviously you can get, the competitive awards to get those paid for by the government. But I just had grown up in a paycheck to paycheck family with a lot of financial insecurity. And so that was a big motivator for me.

And then the other part was I was just, seeing left and right, people such as yourself, had left. And I was like, wow, these are people who I had admired. And I thought, they were working either parents or people that tried to live these balanced lives and it didn't look like it was working.

And yeah I made the decision to leave. And I had a very rough transition into a medical device company. And I say very rough, just because we're not trained at all, I think as scientists, from my understanding, my estimation. I take a lot of people interested in leaving, probably more than once a month, I take these interest interviews for lack of a better way of saying it from people who want to know what it's like. And it still seems to be the case that our academic institutions are just not equipping today's student body for a life outside of academia.

And that really hit me smack in the face from a cultural perspective. I had always assumed that evidence and data would lead conversations and decision making, especially in a business where you wanted to really spend those dollars appropriately. And that's just not how the world works. I transitioned from product development into medical affairs, hoping I could find my people cause I was an N of one and it just didn't get any better. I moved over to a startup really polar opposite, where I took a senior leadership role at a 50 person org that was growing like crazy. And scientifically, it was fantastic. I worked very closely with data science. I really loved like trying to implement a lot of what I'd been trained in, which was more like personalized intervention development. But the operations and the core culture of the company was a complete misalignment with my values. And I raised a lot of concerns and they weren't well-received and we parted ways after just six months.

So I got back into consulting, which I had done a little bit and I was able to find a connection with a woman who is an incredible leader, mother and we've got this opportunity at Tandem. She'd been working there for a few years. And so I started consulting for them and then really liked the people and decided, once they had this job, a full-time in house job opportunity that again, thinking of stability, financial security, my husband wanted to make a change that it would just be the best for me and our family. So that's where I am.

**Jacqueline:** You mentioned coming across this female leader, I'd like to just hear about what about her made her seem like a good female leader? I think that's what we need is role models and that's so important. So describe to me what it was about her style, that appeals to you.

**Gina:** I love this question. As soon as you started to ask it, I was like smiling and feeling warm and fuzzy inside. I think the initial attraction was really the more stereotypical presence when you first meet someone and you feel that attraction. And it's authentic. It's not oh, that person like is good looking or holds a position of power. And I want something a genuine, like a soul vibration of some kind. I and I'm not trying to be cheesy and saying that it was really a moment where cause I remember it very well actually. Like I can picture myself in the coffee shop. She just had a way that she carried herself that was very unapologetic. And it's interesting to talk about it now because I've become a huge Glennon Doyle fan. I am holding off on reading Untamed for the second time, because I just want to cherish it. I just love the way that she's opened up my eyes. It's specialness almost feels sacred. I feel like there's like a responsibility when I open it up again that there's like an action that I have to take both internally and externally to the world. Which I think is part of her power. It's transcendent. So yeah, so Steph had that way about her that really just felt unapologetic and she's tall. She takes up space. And she immediately asked me about me, she didn't dive into what do I do? What do I want? It was more like, who are you? And then I think it got mentioned pretty early on in the conversation that she was a collegiate athlete and I was a collegiate athlete. And I find that when I meet mothers in particular, who are working professionals who are also athletes, I just feel like that's this trifecta for me.

Unfortunately there can be instances in the workforce where there's a competitiveness and I know this is cliche and people say this, but I have experienced it. Where women feel like they have to compete because there's not as many seats at the table. And so I'm always on guard. I tend to be a relationship person who jumps in feet first, I don't question. And I don't maybe have as many boundaries as I should. And then I can realize later oh gosh, I maybe shouldn't have been that way because that person isn't, being the best version of themselves or it's not as healthy for me, but Steph time and again, over the over years was just always this consistent life force. She held me in such high esteem and she just understood why I was making the decision I was making. And now here I am, we're colleagues. I'm not on her team, but I work with her and our friendship has only strengthened.

**Jacqueline:** Tell me a little bit more about that experience and as a new mother and what you think could have been better.

**Gina:** Yeah, it was really traumatic and it's, hearing you say that story, it seems like all moms and working moms have had at least one really negative experience and that just highlights like how much work there is to do. Pumping at work is very practical, like logistical, it's operational; there's timing, there's supplies, there's space. And so for me I had obviously was my first child. I'd never done breastfeeding before. I had never pumped before. And so there's a lot of vulnerability there and I remember feeling vulnerable and, I know we know each other pretty well, and I'm not one to usually like cower in a corner and not feel like how to ask for help. But I think, there's things like: are my breasts gonna explode in a meeting? Am I leaking? How do I get this milk cold as quickly as possible? Do I just put it in the refrigerator? Like I just had so many questions. And at that point I just come back from leave. So it's you're also like, oh, while you were gone, like there's new people in the office. And there had been a space dedicated, but it wasn't really fully dedicated. So it was like a wellness room. And I didn't really understand the policies when I first came back. I think California law requires based on the size of the institution or maybe for academic institutions in general, spaces from others to pump. But I didn't know any of that. No one had told me like where to find that information. I think it was a few months in before I like downloaded the app or got onto the website.

But I went to this wellness room and there was like a key. And you had to check it out from this desk, but the desk wasn't always staffed and I had to sign in and out, but people would sleep in the room.I would get messaging really directly, very crudely from this woman who managed the space. Hey, you have to share the space and no, you can't use it at this time. And it's, we don't staff the desk after four. And I was like what if I have a meeting? And your breasts are gonna explode. It's a very legitimate concern. And she just had zero empathy. And I actually got to a place one day where I'd forgotten my pants. And I had exercise that morning and I was carrying six bags. And so I was in my foot flops in my sweaty running shorts and she made me cry and I cried in front of her and I felt just terrible.

And so I actually had to go to the ombudsman. I didn't have to, but I chose to try to do a reporting because this woman she's making me feel this bad and I'm not one to usually cry to someone's face like that, then I'm sure she's going to harm other women who come back and have the same experience. So yeah, that was pretty traumatic. I started pumping elsewhere. I then moved over to that shared postdoc, like I mentioned, so I was cutting across campus more and there were some other more friendly spaces for me to use.

I got really frustrated when people would say we're meeting the requirements. And I would go to this one pumping room and it was in the engineering section of the campus. And there were these three women and we would all be in there at the same time. Let me tell you what it's like when there's three women who don't know each other who are all trying to relax, have let down. And then there's a fridge that is only going to hold so many bottles of milk. You have to clean your supplies. And then if I walk into another meeting on campus, does that meeting location have a refrigerator . You have to think about all these things, the planning doesn't begin and end with checking boxes on a state mandated spreadsheet, you have to really talk to those stakeholders who are the working moms and have a really comprehensive plan.

I actually don't remember all of the little things that added up to culminate for me to go talk to you. And I think I talked to peers as well, a couple of peers who were in our group who are either finishing up their PhD or were post-docs. But I remember a couple of them. So the situation was someone who used to be a close friend and a colleague of mine who was a man who was senior to me, but not by many years. We shared space. We shared working space. You mentioned you think it's just you and I think that is such a persistent problem. I still feel that today where I'll get these like paper cut, I hate the word micro sexism. Like it's just sexism. Things will happen to us in our working day or at the grocery store or wherever. And we're like, oh, did I do something? What could I have done differently? And so I remember that there were like all these little things where I was asking myself like, oh, did I, was I too aggressive? Or did I step out of my lane? And then finally there was enough of these situations and I was paying attention, like trying to be as objective as possible. Okay, is this man trying to put me in a corner and assert his either intellectual authority, power authority or just dominance? And I think this issue of intention is really interesting because I've heard a lot of like people, when you talk to them about your experience, they're like he didn't mean to do that, or, oh, he just didn't know. And then it's as though, like that's supposed to just excuse the behavior. And I always think if I'm speeding on the highway and a cop pulls me over, I don't get to say I didn't know.

So yeah, so I do remember coming to you with my concerns. And I remember I had felt compelled to share it with someone senior, senior leadership relative to the position that I was in, because I did hope to have conversations at another level that it would be addressed. Because I knew that he was getting into mentoring roles and I was watching him just dominate conversations. And that was also his personality. But that could potentially affect this person's career trajectory, because if he's being put in a position of authority over a person who's trying to be groomed or trained, and then he has these issues with control, sexism then that person and the person particularly was also a woman, her growth and her maturation and all of these wonderful things that she's expecting to have happen are going to be stunted and maybe she's going to quit. And so that was my intent. And I remember feeling very uncomfortable in our shared space because we were physically very close together. And I do remember, I eventually shared with him directly my thoughts. I remember practicing it, and he just didn't get it. It was basically like, oh, that's all in my head. I don't know what I'm talking about.

I think that I felt compelled again to escalate it for that principled reason, like you mentioned before to try to really protect future people. Those experiences did play into my ultimate decision. I've had tons of sexism in industry, but I think that type of intersection of like intellectual superiority and like the male ego in an academic environment felt very suffocating and offensive to me because I know how hard I worked and I know how smart and how dedicated I was to my craft and to feel like someone was trying to step on me in that way was just really hurtful.

The situation that we were in that environment. There was a male head who'd been in that group, leading it for a very long time. And I remember he wasn't receptive. I don't think I told him in full everything that was happening, but like every way I feel like we turned or could turn, there was a man in charge. And I think that's part of the problem.

**Jacqueline:** I admire you for standing up for yourself and for others, because we have to start to do that, but again, what does it take?

**Gina:** You have to practice. I was just on an emerging leaders panel at work. So I was a panelist for this class of emerging leaders, and I talked about practicing conflict. So there's that book, Radical Candor. The principles are, no matter your circumstance, be honest and authentic in your feedback, because otherwise you're doing not just yourself a disservice, but the other person really. Once you practice giving that radical candor feedback in the moment, you'll get better at it. And so you just mentioned a minute ago that you quote unquote failed and I would say that's just one step on that ladder of you learning how to do better next time. Like it's part of the process.

**Gina:** And so I actually ended up doing something that I never thought I would end up doing, which was drinking too much. It crept up on me slowly. It's really important. People have expectations of what problem drinking looks like. Yeah. I also was that person who would say, I come from a home with alcoholism. So my mom had active alcoholism my entire life. She has three years of consecutive sobriety today, but did not get sober or into her recovery until I was in my PhD program. So I'm very aware of what alcoholic drinking looks like. But for moms in particular, it's mommy wine time. Oh my gosh, you had such a long day. You work full time. Look at all these things you're juggling. And so I just became a nightly wine drinker and it wasn't serving me and I knew it, but it definitely took reading Glennon Doyle's book reading a book called This Naked Mind by Annie Grace, We are the luckiest by Laura McCowen. The point is that it's not really about the volume. Although I think daily drinking is obviously not a public health recommendation, but you look around you and everyone's doing it. But it's how does it make you feel? I wasn't getting up to go running in the morning, even though I'd already decided, I'm not going to train for races every weekend.

I'm going to still take care of myself. And I think I had lost touch with who I am. And this is also related to what I'm in now, which is recovery as an adult child of an alcoholic. So I started going to therapy and that has transformed my life more than I ever thought. I just didn't know what was on the other side, but becoming a mom was a huge trigger for me. A lot of complex PTSD memories have surfaced. And so , I had a choice I could say, okay, this is really hard, and this is very painful and I don't want to feel, so I'm just going to keep having wine every night. And we know that progression, usually happens with substance use. And I just knew, I never was going to do that. And I started to pick up new tools. I've always been an achiever. And I think that, for folks who are medically trained doctors or PhD trained doctors, you get into that and you're very competitive and you're very driven and all of these things, but the downside is that you often don't give yourself space to feel. And I could see that in order for me to be the best mother and to also mother myself, which if I can't mother myself, then I can't be the best mother I can be to my children. I was going to have to face my demons for lack of a better way of saying it.

I started going to therapy a year ago in October and I did four months of completely abstinent from alcohol and now I don't really drink but I say it's a long, slow breakup with wine. I've let it back in my life occasionally. And I'm okay with that. It's an interesting kind of thing. I'm very cognizant of when I'm reaching for it, that it's like I'm doing it because it's habitual and because I'm out to dinner and I just, my husband orders a drink and all of that.

**Gina:** Yeah. And I think so for me, one of the things that I've been working on in therapy is excessive reliance on the self. So I'm an only child. So been independent in that regard my whole life, but just I can do it. I can do it. I used to have this phrase that I would say as an athlete, I wouldn't want to compete against me, which just tell you what kind of athlete I was. A defender, I played soccer. And so just very rough and tumble aggressive athlete. But in my PhD program and then I've had intermittent, I still struggle with it today, more frequently than I would like insomnia. And what I've discovered through therapy is, you can't trust your thoughts. When you're struggling in the middle of the night, you just can't because you're in and out of a light sleep state.

But I think for me, and this is where the personalization is so important is. I was abandoned so much as a child. And so I'm very paranoid if I feel like I can't trust myself, I don't trust other people, even though I've got all these warm, loving relationships. And so I will wake my husband up in the middle of the night. I'm like, just tell me it's going to be okay. Tell me it's going to be okay. And it's really important that I can heal that within myself so that I can equip my children with, Hey, when you're struggling, you don't have to go it alone. Like I am just here. I'm just here for you. You're going to wake up in the morning. I'm not going to be gone on a drunken escapade. I'm not going to be, passed out, hung over. Like we're going to have a consistency but also if you want to go play by herself in the room, you can do that. And then, Hey, I'll be making pancakes in the kitchen. And it's not to say it's all perfect and roses. Cause it's not. And you have to be careful, like you said, like being too hard on yourself with expectations.

But I think it's just like leaning into what I need in my day-to-day space and really cultivating that. The thing about a working mom that really bothers me is, there's this concept of selflessness and it's like Glennon Doyle is that's the biggest insult you could ever levy. And I agree. I don't want to be absent of self. So I'm not being selfish when I say I'm mothering myself. Doing any of that is actually the most loving and giving thing that I could ever do for my family. And we just need to change the conversation because it's just so misplaced and I still see it on posts on Instagram. She's so selfless and I'm like cringing.

**Jacqueline:** Right. And even an advert recently, it's to the supermom heroes or whatever, I'm like, no, don't make us supermom heroes. Don't make that the expectation. I think what Glennon Doyle said is don't be a martyr be a role model. Especially to our daughters. And that's what I think is you're role modeling self love. And wouldn't we want our kids to do that for themselves and have that for themselves? So yeah we definitely get judged at all levels. So anything else you want to share with me around any of your social activism, your thoughts about how to work on gender equity in the workplace or how to help working moms, from your behavioral perspective and, your always thoughtful approach?

**Gina:** Sure. I think a practical piece of advice from a workplace standpoint would be documentation. I've always cared about documentation from a data analysis perspective. And so whatever work line of work you're in taking that same approach to some of the interpersonal sides of your workplace. So maybe that's on an email thread. I did this actually just last week, to a senior woman, I said, can you reply to the email thread and just give your approval? Because unfortunately we often find ourselves in he said, she said situations. And I don't mean for egregious, although it would apply here too, but like harassment, sexual assault, racism, things like that. But those micro cuts are those like that's not how I remember the conversation.

So I'd say that's a practical piece of advice. I think from a social activism standpoint, I look at how much privilege I have as a white woman. And I always ask myself what can I do to do my part to unburden black women and women of color from having to do that activism and educational role. And so I try to read books. 'So you want to talk about race'. This is the one I'm reading right now. And then when I do have opportunities to have a platform, I try to elevate. So I'm very active on Twitter. I try to elevate the voices of other women, particularly black women to show that intersectionality. And then also to speak out, because I think just if you want to just say like you're against sexism, you have to actively be anti-sexist anti patriarchal. And I think we all hear that saying with racism, like you can't just say I'm not racist. You have to actively be anti-racist. So some people aren't as comfortable.

But I think finding where you are comfortable, like a great example, one-on-one conversations. So you'll have a family members or something, and they'll just say something that's like slightly off, like slightly sexist, slightly racist, whatever it is. And you don't have to confront their beliefs. You don't have to go off on a monologue. You can just say, I don't agree with you and that makes me feel really uncomfortable and let's just not talk about that. Because I think over time, if enough of us are out there doing that, that becomes part of the solution for change-making, 5, 10, 15, 20 generations from now.

**Gina:** Yeah. And I think just one thing I'd add is a good example is, we talked about being labeled aggressive and I'm always reminded that, as a white woman, just as a woman, we have to always, it's just in the back of our heads oh, you're a leader. You're actually being labeled bossy. You're assertive. Or you have an opinion that you should have and you should voice and you're aggressive. And then I think if I were a Black woman, not only would I be labeled aggressive, I could potentially be labeled dangerous or just like that angry black woman trope. And so I think, yeah, just recognizing that privilege. And people, I think don't like to talk about it. Cause then they're like, same thing with I'm not racist, it's not my fault that I was born white or whatever. And it's not your fault, but it's your responsibility.