**Overcoming working mom burnout**

**Episode 3: Creating leaders who ask, listen and respond to employee needs with HR and leadership expert Rachel Cooke**

**The engine that powers your business is your people.** And so if your people aren't feeling supported, informed, cared for, if they're not feeling valued, if they're not feeling frankly, able to do the work you hired them to do a, they're going to leave or worse; they're going to stay and be unproductive. There's a business imperative to invest in your people . CEOs need to remember their bosses. What were the behaviors that you remember them demonstrating that helped move you forward? And which were the ones that held you back? And no CEO has ever said I had a leader that yelled at me a lot and that really helped my performance. It's just not the reality.

**Telling employees to go follow a bunch of instructions is not the way to do change:** Companies ask how do we execute a change in a way that leaves our employees feeling engaged: Like they are partners and they are champions and they're coming on a journey with us versus feeling like victims of it. That's usually the ask that I'm now starting to see, and by the way I'm so grateful that leaders are starting to recognize that just defining a change well on paper is not enough. Otherwise employees speak with their feet and organizations right now, especially can't afford to lose their top talent.

**The worst thing you can do is ask for employees for input and disregard it:** There's nothing that feels worse as an employee than actually being asked to share your opinion. And then as an employee, showing that candor and that courage to offer it up and then just see it completely disregarded. And I think organizations are doing a lot of that right now. We're seeing a lot of surveys and pulses and focus groups and voice of the employee. And there's lots of questions and conversation, but in terms of response and reaction in a way that really demonstrates we heard you, we care about what you have to say. It doesn't mean that you need to do everything that employees suggested. It is perfectly fair to say, you gave us 12 outstanding suggestions. 10 of them just aren't feasible right now. We heard them. And here's why we've decided not to pursue them, but here are the two that we are executing on.

**The problem is that we don't ask, or sometimes we ask, but our culture is not necessarily one of psychological safety**: I think too many companies are looking for the expert to tell them what to do. What's the right answer. What are the right practices? And the answer always is what are your teams telling you? What pain points are they seeing? What feedback are they hearing? What challenges are they facing? Your employees are sitting on a gold mine of data. But the problem is that we don't ask, or sometimes we ask, but our culture is not necessarily one of psychological safety. And so people are afraid to speak up. And when people are afraid to speak up. We don't get the riches of their interior insights, which are the best insight.

**Leaders have to engage their employees in the solutions and provide a vision with empathy:** I do believe when people are part of creating the solution they're more engaged in trying it out. There isn't an easy answer and we all are involved in this experimentation process. Employees have a sense of ownership when they felt like they played a role in designing solutions. And another piece of this is that the organization did a good job of establishing a sense of vision. It's not just about including employees in designing the roadmap, but it's also about getting them excited about where you're heading. You have to convince them that where you're heading is for some set of reasons, more compelling than where you are today. But that you've also put yourself in their shoes. You're also acknowledging some of the pain points they may experience along the way.

**It's not so much a requirement to care, but it's a requirement to ask and listen and respond,** Are asking your employees what they need. They're asking for boundaries. They're asking for permission to not have to run everything by you. They're asking you for things that will help them be more successful and more productive. You need to ask, you need to listen and you need to respond. And if you do those things and you still don't care, you can still be successful. If you're a leader and you don't care about your employees I can't make you care and I can't make caring about somebody a requirement. You have to be willing to ask the questions that give you insight into their lived experience and you have to be willing to help them problem solve to make it better. But at the end of the day, you don't have to care.

**Empathy is the asking and listening and compassion is the responding**. You actually do something to change the situation, and you provide them more resources. You can't change who they are or necessarily the problem, but you can provide more resources or change something to help them. Asking, listening, are actions. Caring is an emotion. And I don't think you can mandate in an emotion, but you can mandate an action, a behavior.

**Managers need to celebrate small successes in team processes**. Leaders are high performers so they have succeeded by chasing the next result, the next milestone. And it is so important, both for yourself and for your team. But when you do that, pause and reflect, not only to how's it going but hey what have we accomplished? It could be really small wins, somebody on my team just asked a brave question and that really brought us to a place of insight. Somebody on my team actually stepped up and said, hey, I'd like to run this meeting. Celebrating that a person is being proactive and they brought some new energy into the conversation. Celebrating creates an endorphin response in our bodies and it reminds our body that felt good. I want to do that again. I'm going to do that again.

**Managers need to be having more conversation with their teams, infused into their day**. Not meeting updates, not giving performance feedback, but just genuine dialogue, asking open questions, inviting ideas, sparking conversation, being comfortable with debate. I always say that this is not going to be an exercise in trying to carve out an extra hour where you can sit and be a leader. It's really about finding ways to infuse dialogue, compassion, empathy, celebrating into the DNA of how you conduct your business. And so I'm not going to ask you to find an extra hour. I'm going to ask you to look at the hour you just spent with your team and ask yourself, how could you have infused bits of these things that we're talking about into that hour? It's not about finding more time. It's about changing our mindset and in turn our actions and behaviors in the time we're already spending and doing it just a little bit differently, a bit more empathetically and inclusively .

**Training is not the answer to develop human skills**. There are absolutely spaces where I think training is the right modality, but when it comes to people and humanity and engaging with our teams, it is almost never a training issue. Training in my mind is about a transfer of knowledge and information. And I believe knowledge and information is absolutely key, but it's also table stakes. If you're not doing something to actually help the people who you are training to start to change their behavior as a result of having that information, then you haven't really accomplished something. What we also talk about is; what are the things that hold us back, we identify some of the obstacles. Maybe it's not enough time, maybe it's the CEO isn't bought in, maybe it's my team is remote, but we put some of those obstacles on the table and we collaboratively identify some solutions. I think it's really important to acknowledge, there are reasons we're not doing these things. You strip out some of the rigor of the training and build in more discussion, more practice, more role-plays more kind of accountability mechanisms.

**Accountability is about being willing to step up and do the thing you need to do in service of the outcome**. Let's call accountability ownership. And there needs to be individual accountability and there needs to be shared accountability. We need to clear some of that dark energy out of the space accountability is not the punishment for somebody who falls off the change plan or, how do we shame each other. It's about recognizing ahead of time, what it is that you need in order to hold yourself accountable and putting a plan in place. So it's about being mindful of yourself and what you need. It is about asking for help. It is about creating rhythms. It is about celebrating and recognizing success. When you see it in others, these are some of the mechanisms that we put in place that start to make it a positive experience. People suddenly want to be accountable. Thinking of metrics of success. Not blaming and shaming. Like we're measuring where we want to get to.

**You will never believe or shame yourself into a good habit**. If you're a leader in an organization and you have to have these performance conversations and you have to give feedback and you have to coach in it. You’re tired. You don't have time for this. And if you can shift your mentality into wait a minute, if I can invest a little bit of time in my team, they will become more independent of me. They won't need me to make so many decisions for them. They will be able to make their own decisions. They'll be able to be proactive and take on more work because they have the context to understand what needs to happen. And if you can shift your mentality around the why is this thing that I'm being asked to do? Why is it important? Why does it matter? And frankly, how does it serve me even a little bit? Selfishly, when you have that shift in your mindset, it can really also help to create the accountability.

**Good leadership can be learned from books and trainings, but great leadership comes out of reflection.** Thinking about your own professional experiences and the leaders that inspire you, the leaders under whom you learned and grew and delivered amazing results. When we reflect on those experiences, we're able to recognize what served us and what held us back. And I think that if we can harness that into a look forward, we can really put great leadership into the spotlight.

**Managers need to take time to just pause and reflect**. I see so many managers, so focused on results, they're looking forward and they're chasing. And I think that there's really an opportunity to take a few minutes in your day to pause and just ask, how are we doing? Are the things that we're doing now serving us to move in the right direction. Is my team okay? Is there an opportunity to stop and shift course or maybe stop doing something? So first and foremost, I think pause and reflect.

**The goal is not to help people manage burnout it's to help prevent burnout it's to help mitigate it from happening in the first place**. I'm starting to see companies do a lot of things in the realm of burnout, like adding in extra vacation days or adding in more benefits, like employee assistance programs, or, like yoga classes and meditation. And, companies are starting to make investments in helping their employees manage the burnout, which is better than nothing. But to me, it is the solution to the wrong problem. It is very much not about offering extra days off in meditation. It is about changing the fundamental way that business is being conducted. Such that burnout is not becoming an issue in the first place. And that for me is very much around things like getting much more clear on purpose and getting teams aligned on the core of what they need to be doing. What are the things we should keep doing and what are the things we should stop doing? So it's staying really aligned. It's maintaining open communication. It's being willing to shift and renegotiate priorities. It's being willing to say, you know what, we do need to do this thing, but we don't need to do it tomorrow. So we're going to postpone it. Or it's being willing to say things like, you know what we need to produce this thing. Somebody over here in this other department produced something similar last year. It's not exactly the same thing, but it'll get us 80% of the way there. And we're going to call that good enough. How are we going to continue to evaluate and assess our priorities, our energy, our boundaries, all of these things. My answer to most questions is you got to have the conversation with your team.

**Companies need to invest time in getting very rigorously clear on their priorities**: what are the discrete pieces of work, the activities, the conversations, the projects that are actually going to impact productivity and being ruthless about stripping out everything else. I'm not suggesting that people work less. So that the time we're going to spend is going to be spent on our most impactful projects.

**The biggest secret that leaders haven't yet quite caught on to is focusing on impact**: Leaders should not be looking for the next product, tool, framework. It is getting clear on where we are having impact and considering all the rest noise. Having the courage and the clarity to label the noise for what it is and strip some of it out. We don't place enough value on thinking time, networking time, reflecting time, learning time. It takes a bit of discipline and a bit of organizational permission to start to place real value and allow people to protect the time to do the things they need to.