**Overcoming working mom burnout**

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

**Rachel:** My name is Rachel Cooke. I live in the Northeast of the United States and I have two daughters currently ages 14 and 11, almost 12, going on 60. And I am the founder of Lead Above Noise. We are a small firm specializing in designing interactive experiences for leaders in their teams to activate performance.

**Jacqueline:** And you are also the modern mentor.

**Rachel:** I am also the host of the modern mentor podcast. Thank you for that reminder.

**Jacqueline:** So briefly, can you describe your journey to where you are now?

**Rachel:** Yeah, absolutely. The shortest story for me is that I did my undergraduate work in psychology. I did my graduate work in organizational psychology, and I landed in a corporate human resources job, probably pretty predictably.

And I did that for about seven years. I was at the fortune 100 organization and it was tremendous experience, great company, great people, great learning. So much to gain. But I got to a point where a couple of things converged for me. The first was that I started to feel not by any means that I had learned everything that there was to learn in my full-time role. I don't think we've ever learned anything that we can learn, but I did feel more and more over ti me a cog in somebody else's wheel. I felt like I was continuing to execute their strategies, their plans striving for their goals. And I was really interested in being a bit more of a changemaker than an executer.

At the same time my daughters were getting into those years, they were in their younger elementary school years and they were the years I started to feel more important to me to be more present in their lives, physically and emotionally. And so with all of those factors converging, I decided to start my own business six years ago.

I named it Lead Above Noise because I hold a very strong belief that a lot of organizations are searching for the next thing, right? What is the next tool? The next framework, the next product we can add. And I think so much of what leadership requires is quite the opposite. It is getting so clear on where are we really having impact?

What is everything else? That's what I call the noise. And having the courage and the clarity to label the noise for what it is and strip some of it out. I think that is the biggest secret that leaders haven't yet quite caught on to.

**Jacqueline:** It's interesting to hear that perspective cause I also feel as a leader, you need some time where there is no noise. Like we don't take enough time away from all the noise and meetings to actually really think deeply to free our brains, to go into that creative space, to be able to come up with ideas. And again, not to do this on your own because leaders very much have to get input, but it's, I think it's just hard to come up with good solutions when you're surrounded by the everyday.

**Rachel:** I couldn't agree more. And I think we just, we have this mentality at least here in the U S where any space that looks empty on the calendar must be okay to schedule a meeting. It's like meetings are Kings or Queens. We don't place enough value on thinking time, networking time, reflecting time, learning time.

Everything that sort of sits in one of those boxes. If we get a request for a meeting always takes precedent and I totally agree. I think we just, 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.

**Jacqueline:** So what are some of the biggest barriers to organizational change that you see in your work? You're having people come to you who are probably ready to change that's that they're in a different stage maybe than others, but still, what are you seeing?

**Rachel:** Yeah. When I work with organizations and help them lead and navigate their teams through a change, which is a big piece of what we do.

The conversation that I have is not usually, hey, we have no idea how to do this, but rather, you know what, we've done this a lot of times we know how to do it. But we don't seem to be doing it. It seems like we our people are getting disengaged, they're getting unfocused, they're getting grumpy.

Like how do we not so much, how do we do it? How do we build the change plan? But 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 and then telling employees to go follow a bunch of instructions is not the way to do change.

And so that's usually the conversation that I'm having

**Jacqueline:** And I'm also happy that they've actually had some form of evaluation, even if informal, to realize that they're failing. Cause I think that's part of the time is when people are just taking a checkbox to say we did the thing and not actually having any idea. So in some ways I'm glad the employees are unhappy about it because at least that's feedback.

**Rachel:** That's exactly right. And they sometimes, speak with their feet and organizations right now, especially can't afford to lose their top talent.

**Jacqueline:** And that's interesting to see that, that is what is happening. One of my friends, her company was very much trying to get feedback into policies, to get people, to go back into the office. They didn't really listen to the feedback and then they set out a policy. The managers didn't know how to handle questions about that policy cause their feedback had not been included. And then the policy. They wanted everyone back in the office. And I think they all going to see people leaving because of it.

**Rachel:** I always like to say the second worst thing you can do is not ask your employees for their insights and their inputs. The worst thing you can do is ask and disregard it, right? 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. And by the way, when I say that organizations need to respond, it doesn't mean that you need to do everything that employees suggested.

It is perfectly fair to say, you know what? 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. And so I think organizations feel just because they said it, we don't have to do it, and that's true, but you do have to respond to it.

You do have to confirm that their courage and their candor were worth it and they should continue to offer you that. I think that is a really big missed opportunity.

**Jacqueline:** Yes. And that they were heard here's the feedback we got and here's what we're able to leverage at the moment. That was an interesting point. I helped a company called Tendlab with their Time's Up guide that they had. And that was one of the pieces that I added to it is once you've collected the data, make sure you feed it back. So we have this concept from behavior change. But also from quality improvement, which again, I see more in the healthcare space, but you may also have seen in business spaces where basically you're having these learning cycles.

And so every time the whatever you collected is reviewed, fed back into the system reviewed again. And you just keep doing these plan, do study act cycles where you're actually checking, okay, this is what we heard. What should we do? Try something. It didn't work here again and just keep going. And it's this principle of quality improvement, ongoing learning.

And so that's why it's always in my head is because everybody's involved in that process. That's what I think I've learned as a parent, as well as my kids have great solutions. And I love it because it takes the problems off of my shoulder and the responsibility to solve everything. And I think employees could be engaged in the same way.

**Rachel:** I think that is exactly right. As somebody who has read more parenting books than I care to admit, I have lots of, quote unquote right answers in my head. But the reality is what is going to impact my child in the most positive way. Is something only my child can answer.

I think it's great to get ideas from outside. Let it shape your thinking. Let it trigger your creativity. But as you move from exploring external practices to choosing internal ones, you have got to ask your stakeholders. And I think that is exactly the same thing when it comes to parenting.

And when it comes to employees, I think that's exactly right. And 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? If you're looking to improve your customer service, let's say, why don't you talk to the employees that actually engage with the customers and why don't you ask them?

What pain points are they seeing? What feedback are they hearing? What challenges are they as service representatives experiencing, where do they need to be more empowered to serve the customer as they need to be served? No external customer service expert can tell you that 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.

**Jacqueline:** And I do believe when people are part of creating the solution they're more engaged in trying it out. And I think it's really helpful to people because I always get this sense that, oh, there's some answer and somebody's job is to make that solution happen. And there isn't, there isn't an easy answer and the more we all are involved in this experimentation process of saying, okay, let's try this see if it works. And then adjust then everybody takes it more as their responsibility, as opposed to Manager's job to solve their problems.

**Rachel:** That's exactly right. Engaging them in the process to go back to parenting what we all know, what's the best way to get your kids to eat veggies, right? It's to invite them into the kitchen, to help prepare the dish, when they feel like they've had a hand in making it, there's so much more inspired to eat it and absolutely in the workplace. It's the same thing when employees have a sense of ownership. 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, right? It's not just about including employees in designing the roadmap, but it's also about getting them excited about where you're heading. Change is hard, for anybody who is familiar with the change curve is built upon the work done by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and the 1950s on grief and death and dying the change curve.

And the change and grief curve are one in the same. And that may sound super morbid. And I do not mean to imply that organizational change is quite that tragic, but the reality. Change, even a change that we are excited about always represents the death of the old ways. And so change just naturally from a human perspective is hard.

And so what organizations need to realize is that you've got to get people bought into why you're doing this. You have to convince them that where you're heading is for some set of reasons, more compelling than where you are today. And if you don't invest the time in building that vision and it has to be true, right?

It's not about developing some ad campaign. It has to be based in reality. And it also has to connect with the employee reality. And so what I coach employee or what I coach leaders on in the context of organizational changes, you've got to combine your vision as a leader, right? What you are so excited about with a sense of empathy, you have to show employees that you've got a vision, but that you've also put yourself in their shoes.

And you're thinking about why this is an exciting place we're heading. You're also acknowledging some of the pain points they may experience along the way. And you're inviting them to help you create the solutions. And I think that is essentially the formula for bringing people along on a journey.

**Jacqueline:** And I agree with you as a behavior change scientist, behavior change is hard. It takes so much I have this little guide that I use to to help folks, which is, about the plan you have to create has to have so many elements in it to help you succeed. It's not that behavior change is impossible, it's that you need so many supportive infrastructures; mental and physical to help you get there. And I think that's the thing when people acknowledge that it's going to take work and resources. It's going to take money time then, we are at least on the same page. I think that's where sometimes that seems to be missing.

So what do you wish managers would do more often?

**Rachel:** There are a few things that I wish managers would do more often. First and foremost, just pause and reflect. I think managers, and I'm obviously speaking in broad strokes and certainly there are exceptions in shades of gray, but 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 and I'm not talking about, sitting in your office and meditating for three hours but genuinely taking a few minutes in your day to pause and just ask, how are we doing? These are the things that we're doing now, serving us are moving 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. Another thing I'd love to see managers be doing more of is celebrating small successes. Again, I think once you've made it to a manager role, you've shown yourself, right?

You are most likely in some sense, a high performer. And so you're always chasing the next result, the next milestone. And it is so important, both for yourself and for your team. When you do that, pause and reflect, not only to how's it going, how are we doing along, but hey what have we accomplished?

Even a small win, right? It doesn't have to be, we sold the business. We've renewed the client. We delivered the new product. 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 or, it's small things like that.

Somebody on my team actually stepped up and said, hey, I'd like to run this meeting. Would that be okay? And that person is being proactive and they brought some new energy into the conversation. And celebrating, not just our big achievements and outcomes, but also just the small behaviors and actions that our teams are showing along the way I think is incredibly important.

And then I think the third thing is, what we've been talking about it doesn't just have to be in the context of leading through a big change. I think in a day to day in a day-to-day way, managers need to be doing more conversation with their teams, not meeting updates, not giving performance feedback, but just genuine dialogue, asking open questions, inviting ideas, sparking conversation, being comfortable with debate.

These are the things that, that really move us forward collectively.

**Jacqueline:** And so how do we get more of that into the mindset and the practice? Because I was discussing yesterday with a Dean of a school and she spent the first whole year of her job having those conversations.

And then we talked about, yeah, we don't have that scheduled into our day compassionate time. It's almost like we have to set aside some time to actually spend time just with our employees, as you say it in that way of trying to get understanding without checking in on the performance.

**Rachel:** Yeah. And it's interesting. I hear versions of that a lot. 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 not about spending 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 .

**Jacqueline:** Yes. Yes. I think that's definitely a much better approach the infusion but I remember when I had first listened to Kim Scott's radical candor, I actually had to put a post-it note in front of me in meetings. To remind me to do those things. The, some of the things that she had recommended and because it just, wasn't my, natural way of operating. And I think that's where you have to set time aside, because then it becomes like something you actually actively do.

But I do think the infusion is much better, but somehow we do still need it. From the habit, forming perspective, these cues and prompts that it does become natural once, once it becomes a habit, that's the great thing. It's automatic. It is infused, but I feel like at the start cause I led a team of behavior change scientists, but things that we tried, we let go of, we forgot, we didn't really challenge ourselves in our managerial practices to do the same principles we were doing leading other behavior change projects.

**Rachel:** Yeah, I hear what you're saying and it is absolutely a journey and it does take commitment. We talk in my realm about making the transition from conscious competence to unconscious competence, which is a really excessively long way of saying you do need to be reminded and cued to do the thing until it becomes a habit and then you don't need to be reminded anymore.

It's like when you learn to drive a car, you're reminding yourself to hold the wheel and push the gas pedal. And then after you've been doing it for a little while, your body just knows how to do it, and it is the same sort of thing. And this is where, when I work with teams it's interesting, I describe what I do.

I don't do what I would call training because 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. And so when I work with teams, when I run a workshop on a particular topic, let's say leading through change, we, we certainly do the bit about, here's what it looks like and here are the behaviors that are necessary.

But what we also talk about is. What are the things that hold us back, right? So 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 whatever it looks like, but we put some of those obstacles on the table and we collaboratively identify some solutions. So what are some ways that we can get around that? Because I think it's really important to acknowledge, there are reasons we're not doing these things. So we start with identifying the options. We then start to create a little bit of accountability. So my goal isn't, that you read Kim Scott's book and then starting tomorrow, you are showing up radically candid, 45 times a day.

My goal is that next week you do it once. And then the following week, you do it twice and you start to build these small successes, and then I'm going to come back to what I said earlier, which is the importance of celebrating, celebrating creates an endorphin response in our bodies.

So when you see a colleague do it, you call it out. Hey, Hey Joe, Hey, Jane, that was great. You just did the thing that we said we were going to do. And you trigger an action endorphin response and it reminds our body that felt good. I want to do that again. I'm going to do that again.

And yes, it will always take some level of discipline, but there are absolutely things that we can do to support ourselves and our colleagues to help, to create the accountability and help to build that house.

**Jacqueline:** And I am so with you on the education training we have these behavior change models where knowledge is in there, but it's in there with many other things like social norms, like environmental cues and all those things lead to it.

The next box, which is intention, and between the box of intention and behavior. There was a huge gap and a whole lot of stuff has to happen. So knowledge is definitely the first step. There has to be knowledge and awareness. So I would say it's necessary, but it's not sufficient, so much else has to happen.

Yeah. We have to role models. We have to have opportunities to practice to give feedback. And I think, like you say to then celebrate the small wins. So where did you get that perspective from? Was that your psychology and organizational psychology background? Or did you pick this up from other places?

Cause I'm fascinated. I was so excited when I looked into your materials was like, oh my God, she gets behavior change.

**Rachel:** Absolutely. I so I'm going to be a little bit meta here from my psychology background. I had this information in my head, right? Like I knew this stuff, but it wasn't until I spent the first probably year or two of my business as a trainer realizing wait, but that was a really good training, and now I've talked to the client. They haven't really changed their behavior, like what's going on there. And so for me, it was a really big, I don't want to pretend that I came out of the gate, like fully. Clear and ready to go on this front. I had to make mistakes along the way. And so for me, it really comes from my own experience and my own experience in, in supporting and watching and partnering with clients.

And as I started to build more as. 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. That was where I started to see magic happen. And it's another thing, you asked me earlier, what do I wish managers would do more of?

And I would say, I wish managers and people in general would do more experimentation and be willing to learn from failure. That's definitely how I have come to be where I am today.

**Jacqueline:** Thank you very much for that candor too, because it does, it is an experience, but I think too, as a business owner, part of your credibility is that you have impact, right? And so when you're hearing that the approach you had didn't work, whereas I feel like sometimes in businesses impact, isn't actually the end goal. It's just to do the thing that they're supposed to do. So I love that. I love that you've improved upon that. That's so great. And I think that's why we have to be so careful.

And the research is showing that, for example, some of the DEI training on unconscious bias, it's not having the impact it's having, and it can be doing harm because you started out by saying, if this is a burden to employees, feeling supported in what they're doing and you're giving them more training.

It's a problem. And then also I think if we think we've checked the box, we stop paying attention to it and that definitely can start to have negative consequences.

**Rachel:** Oh, I absolutely agree. And if you think about it, anything that you, within reason you think about anything that you wish you were doing, that you're not, maybe you wish you were exercising. Maybe you wish you were meditating. Maybe you wish you were, whatever it is. If you ask yourself, am I not doing it right? Because I lack information. The answer is almost always no. I probably know how to put on sneakers and go for a walk. It's not that I haven't figured out that. And it's the same in business. People in business not coaching their teams because they've never learned a coaching model. Anybody who's in a people leader role has learned bajillions of coaching models. What they haven't learned is how do you activate it? How do you bring it to life? How do you get over your discomfort? And that's really where I think organizations need to get past this idea that it's a training issue, because unless it is a technical skill, right? We're training on a system we're training on a project management methodology, right? 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.

**Jacqueline:** I love that, but as that is such a strong message. I think that's really important for people to hear.

It made me think, as you were saying about the example of the physical activity. Cause that was part of my research space. We even discovered in physical activity that having a Fitbit, although it helps you keep track of your steps because it does it automatically for you, you stop paying attention to it as a goal.

And so we learned, but that actually, if you have a step counter or something that writing down your steps each day reminds you of the goal. And so there has to be this kind of mental process of reflection and seeing the accountability. So it really made me think of what you're saying, which is how do we build accountability in?

What are you trying to help companies do? What systems are working? What's not working.

**Rachel:** I'll tell you the first thing that I do in every conversation that I have with the leadership team on any topic, as we start to move into accountability.

I will always ask them, let's play a quick word association game. When I say accountability, what do you think of? And so far, 100% of the time I get things like blame finger-pointing whose fault is it? And that unfortunately tragically in the world of business. That is what the word accountability has come to mean.

It is a dirty word. Who's accountable. Who's going to answer for this. And that is just such a deeply flawed way of thinking about accountability. And I'm so sad for the poor word that has been hijacked because that isn't what accountability is. Accountability is about ownership, right?

It's about being willing to step up and do the thing you need to do in service of the outcome. So that is the first thing that we do. We start with a conversation around let's reclaim accountability. Let's not make it such a terrible word. Let's call blame, and let's call accountability ownership.

And there needs to be individual accountability and there needs to be shared accountability. And so that's a first piece of it. And then once we clear that some of that dark energy out of the space suddenly, whereas people might've thought the accountability conversation was going to be our it what's the punishment for somebody who falls off the change plan or, how do we shame each other.

When we talk about accountability, we are going to talk about recognizing the thing that happens when we said it was going to happen. We're going to talk about, maybe it's having a buddy 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 going back to the exercise example, if you want to be walking in you're not, ask yourself. Why aren't you? Is it because walking by yourself as boring? Then go find a buddy, right? Go find a buddy that is going to hold you accountable to showing up and they're going to do it with you. Is it because you are having trouble carving out the time away from your kid.

Is there somebody that you can ask, whatever it is, 30 minutes, a week, 30 minutes a day, is there a partner, is there a babysitter it's about recognizing what is the thing, keeping you from doing the thing you want to do, and then putting a strategy in place. And at the end of the day, accountability is not a forcing mechanism.

Like you were saying with the Fitbit, you can write down the steps, but you can't tattoo them on your face. There are limits. And so when I talk about accountability, I don't so much talk about. tools and systems, but I really talk about the tools of humanity, right?

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.

And I think that flip in the meaning of the word really creates a much more open space for that conversation.

**Jacqueline:** Thinking of metrics of success.

**Rachel:** Yeah. Yeah. Not blaming and shaming.

**Jacqueline:** That's so interesting to hear. And again, going back to the healthcare example where certainly there is a framework around quality improvement there in terms of it's a metric that's required by some health care programs and insurers and other things. So there is some of this external pressure too, to be paying attention to it. But then once you start to realize, okay, it's something that we're going to be judged upon. How do we do it the best way? And that's where it's like, we have to know what we're doing to be able to move the needle.

So I see that again it's such an experimental framework where, like you say, you can learn from failure, but you also know where you're trying to get to. It definitely doesn't feel like blame and accountability in that way. It definitely feels like we're measuring where we want to get to

**Rachel:** That's right. We're measuring we're clear on the what, but I think just as important is the why. I'll speak for myself. I spent way too many younger years trying to almost bully myself into exercising and eating a certain way. You have to look this way.

You can't look that way. It was a very negative mentality and you will never believe or shame yourself into a good habit. At least that is my point of view. And then at some point I had this mindset shift and I don't know where it came from, but suddenly I woke up one day and I just felt I don't want to feel icky anymore.

Like I want to feel strong. I want to feel like I have endurance. I want to feel great. And suddenly it became very easy. And I know that sounds a little bit like rainbows and unicorns, but I think sometimes we need to create that mindset shift for ourselves. So if you're a leader in an organization and you're like, oh, I have to have these performance conversations and I have to give feedback and I have to coach in it.

I'm tired. I 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.

**Jacqueline:** Totally agree. And I actually just came across that in Tara Mohr's book. She basically said, how many times do we set goals out of self-criticism instead of self-love. And I was like, that's behavior change. Scientists are not talking about self love goals. But it was so important.

And again, having compassion when you fail, I feel like that in all my behavior change models, I've never seen the word compassion. We have this relapse prevention, we know we're going to fail, so what can we do to stop it happening? But it's come on. Let's bring compassion back in. What would self-love for an organization look like?

**Rachel:** Candidly I work in the realm of business and I work with C-level executives. And so I can talk to you about self-love and I, and that is definitely the ethos that runs through how I conduct myself. It's also not necessarily the language that I will use in a place of business. As you can probably imagine. Even when I was working, full-time in HR, we had all of our frameworks and our words that we would use behind the scene.

But when you engage with the business, you're not showing them a framework or a model it's just running in the back. So absolutely. When I've talked to organizations, I don't talk about self love. What I do talk about is, hey, in order for this business to run, yeah, you've got products, you've got tools, you've got resources, but fundamentally 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. So I really do make it about the business. And I think that when you position it, as there's a business imperative to invest in your people the loving, compassionate component starts to come through there. A lot of what I do when I kick off a workshop is I start with a bit of reflection.

So before we even get into the knowledge and information part, I'll sit down with it with a team of executives and say, I want you to think about your early days in the workplace. I want you to think about some of your earliest successes in the workplace. And I want you to think about a leader who was.

Who was your boss at the time? 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.

And so where I get to the humanity is I force them out of their C-suite. I forced their CEO hat off. And I forced them back into the memory of a younger, more junior version of themselves. I find that. Good leadership can be learned from books and trainings, but great leadership comes out of reflection.

And again, I don't mean that in a crystal sort of way. Literally 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.

**Jacqueline:** I love that. I love all these tools and exercises you do. I was laughing at the improv one and the consequences around accountability because I've done improv comedy. And that's one of the games I play with my kid is consequences. What does this word make you think of? And it helps you see where your kids are coming from, because the words that they come up with I learn about them.

I'm like, Ooh, these words come up for them. This is where their brains at. So I love all these tools that you're describing that help you unpack the problem and get to the heart of the problem. Awesome. And I think what you are saying, and maybe the word is not self-love can be there is caring, like caring for your people. Cause I think that's what, when we see people leaving organizations, they want a caring organization. And I think that can be a value add that the company start to bring.

**Rachel:** I'm going to be a little bit What's the word I'm going to play a little bit of devil's advocate here. And I'm going to say I actually, 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.

I don't think it's so much a requirement to care, but I do think 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. And I'm not suggesting that caring is a bad thing. I think it's the icing on the cake, but I think it's a little bit short-sighted to say that if you don't, I think sometimes leaders can listen to a message like this and think, oh please, this isn't my family.

This is work. This is business. And I want to give people permission not to be terrible or cruel or empathetic. I think it is about empathy versus care. Maybe that's the distinction that I'm going for. 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.

**Jacqueline:** Interesting. I think that's such a good reality check because I think the language and the placement and the messaging is so important. Yeah. And that's also my understanding too. When I first started, I burnt out from my job and I started doing coaching to try and help me see, what could I shift in my mindset?

And I remember one of my first coaches saying where's your compassion. And I was I know that word. I don't know what that means. And again, I've recently heard, we need compassionate managers and I really had to look up the difference between empathy and compassion, because I was like what is the difference?

And so the definition I came across was that empathy is the asking and listening and compassion is the responding. You actually do something to change the situation, somebody, 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.

**Rachel:** So that's so interesting. And when you use those two words, empathy and compassion, the way you just defined them, they're defined by actions, right? 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. And so I think that's a really interesting distinction.

**Jacqueline:** So just briefly, I touched on burnout there and I think one of the things you mentioned about the small successes. So my husband describes me as the basketball coach, who basically is trying to win every single NBA game. And essentially a win is a relief and a loss, a failure loss is just not an option.

Failure is not an option, but the coach doesn't celebrate the win, because one it's like what he had to do. He's just relieved. He got the win and he's thinking about the next game, which he cannot lose. And he described my mindset like that. So I would win these, even up to $10 million grants and I couldn't celebrate them.

I was just like, oh my God, thank God. I set that as a goal that I was going to do it. And I got there. Oh shoot. Now we have to actually do the dang thing and oh, by the way, I'll hire more people, which means our overheads are higher. Oh. And now I have to get another grant to keep it all going.

So it was this just like constant hamster wheel of not able to celebrate and it really made me now as you think about it again; that was the leader I was and I probably didn't celebrate small successes, to be honest, I don't think I even really celebrated the big ones.

And it led to me burning out. How often are people now starting to use your services related to burnout and how do you work? Cause you mentioned needing to celebrate small successes. And that people normally are thinking about the big ones and the performance, and that definitely comes into high achievers and perfectionism of it's never enough.

So what are some of your strategies around helping people manage expectations to help people manage and prevent burnout?

**Rachel:** So what you just described sounds so very exhausting. Like I just can't imagine having to power through that cycle seriously. I am absolutely seeing a significant uptick in conversations around burnout.

And by the way, in some of those cases, companies are coming to me saying, hey, we need to deal with burnout. In other cases, they're coming to me and saying, hey, we need to deal with something else. And then we take a peek behind the kimono. No, this is a burnout problem. So it's not necessarily always the question that they're asking, but it is often the solution that they're needing.

What I'm seeing now, which I think is so interesting is 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. 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. And that 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. Running exercises, like stop starting continues, right? Getting clear on if this is our purpose and this is our intent.

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 for him.

So there are a lot of these types of strategies that leaders and their teams can be utilizing. What I've started to do is I I have designed what I'm calling a team refresh session. I designed it actually. Towards the end of last year, getting people ready to step into this year, 2021 with a bit of just a bit of extra breadth to be able to exhale from their lungs.

And in this convert, in this conversation, I'm essentially facilitating. A lot of these questions and outcomes with leaders in their teams, questions like what have we learned about ourselves as we've navigated through the pandemic, right? Where have we shown up as heroes and what have we discovered new ways of doing and what do we want to celebrate and what do we want to carry with us?

What have we learned that maybe isn't working or isn't serving us or is holding us back? And we facilitate this conversation where we. Start to label things as keep on going or let them go. And then we ultimately align around practices and cadences. So how are we going to keep this conversation alive?

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, but those are some of them. Strategies that we are focused on in order to not manage, but mitigate burnout.

**Jacqueline:** And I think that's so important from Maslach's burnout inventory and all the work they've done; self care is not the answer. Self-care yes can help you manage this what you're going through but that is not the solution that you need to burnout, that’s something at the organizational level has to change.

And that's why burnout often leads to people leaving a company because they can't get that level of change that would allow them to continue. I think that's so important. And I think that's one of the things that I am concerned about as we go back is I know companies in this last year and half, two years now almost some companies were less productive and they, I feel like now they have to get back on track to being productive and overcome the time where they were lacking in productivity. So I don't know what it's going look like if that's the mindset cause people are already exhausted.

**Rachel:** That's right. And I think that the answer to that, I'm not suggesting that people work less. I'm suggesting that they invest a little bit of time in getting very rigorously clear on 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.

**Jacqueline:** So really the time we're going to spend is going to be spent on our most impactful projects. I love that. Rachel, thank you so much for your time today. This has been such a delight. I just love talking about this stuff.

I am so grateful for your time. It's so great to have these little shifts that you make it with every idea to improve it.

**Rachel:** Thank you for the invitation and your energy comes through so clearly, and this has been a delight over here.