

How's Work? with Esther Perel

Season 1: Prologue

Speaker 1: [00:00:00] I just feel continually marginalized. A company that I've loved and given my all and countless late nights and weekends and weeks lost sleep. I just feel like my joy and desire to do it is just crushed.

Esther: You may be listening to this on your way to work right now, or maybe you're actually coming home from work. You may be trying to stop thinking about work, but you can't. The fact is we take home to work and we take work home.

Love and work are the two pillars of our life. But Sigmund Freud said it before me.

In both, we experience a sense of [00:01:00] identity, a sense of belonging, a sense of continuity, and hopefully a sense of self-worth and fulfillment. But we all know that when our romantic relationships are in trouble we need to invest in them, we need to put attention and effort and sometimes seek help, but somehow when it comes to work we endure.

Lately, there's a lot of restlessness and anxiety in the workplace about how we relate to each other how we handle disagreements and breaches of trust. So a few weeks ago, I gathered a small group of people in their office after work to have a conversation.

What are your relationships at work like? How do you handle all these issues? Who do you turn to for help? When do you know things are getting better? And what stands out for you? What is your relational life in the workplace with your co-workers, colleagues [00:02:00] bosses or family members actually like?

Esther: How many of you would say that growing up relationships were central in your family life growing up? Meaning that you were given a set of messages narratives? We all grew up with narratives about relationships that said you're not alone. When you have a problem reach out, you are indebted to others and others to you. You are part of a network of connections. You probably will cultivate a sense of loyalty to those people. Relationships matter and in the end ontologically your idea of the world is: I can trust people I can rely on people people are there for me and I'm there for them. That is a set of messages that make relationships central.

You know an alternative script is that relationships were more peripheral. Basically, it was more [00:03:00] task-oriented rather than relationally-oriented. Societies are more task-oriented and others are more relationally oriented, not just families and individuals. The messages can be you rely on yourself, you have your own feet to stand on. Nobody's ever going to help you as good as you can help yourself. That level of self-reliance says worldview-wise, ontologically, in the end you're on your own. How many of you know that set of messages more? - and it's not either or, but it is, everybody knows the volume that they got.

So how many of you would say relationships peripheral? Right, right. And imagine when a person from one culture, one relational culture, works with a person from another relational culture. That set of messages influences how you come to work, how much you rely on others, how much you think you can do it all yourself, how much you resent the fact [00:04:00] that you have to do it all yourself, but you still think you can do it better than the other so why bother asking, because nobody's going to do it like you. Or how much do you not say that you need help because asking for help is admitting that you are weak and that you can't do it rather than that you are resourceful and that you know your limitations.

This I call the relational dowry.

Everybody has a relationship resume that they got from home, from their culture, their community, their society where they grew up, they bring it to work. It doesn't stay at the door and it interacts as an invisible force underneath all of the manifest relationship dynamics that take place at work.

Esther: When people talk about diversity in the workplace, the one aspect of this diversity that is often absent is the relational diversity. The histories, the resumes, the way that people come to work after having learned for years to live and work and communicate or [00:05:00] not with others. That is the dowry that they bring with them that comes the conscious and the unconscious forces that influences the way they show up, how they how they ask for help or don't, how they communicate or don't, how they compete or collaborate, what happens when they have to deal with a difficult person and let's be clear the difficult person is never themselves.

Esther: I actually have been looking at what is a relational system? What is it made up of? And how do the messages that we receive influence the way we partner with people but also the way we work with people? It's how we love them and how we work with them is pretty much the two primary spaces in which we live. And what has shifted?

So, you know, the same way that I often will say, today many couples, many people actually, are going to have more than one relationship in their adult life and some of them are going to do it with the same [00:06:00] person, I also say that many people are probably going to have more on one job and suddenly even more than one career and the question will be can they have more than one career in the same workplace?

But everybody is trying to straddle feeling rooted, feeling anchored, feeling a sense of belonging, feeling a sense of stability, and at the same time experiencing the potential for growth, for self-development, for renewal, for purpose, for meaning and all of that. I don't need to even justify any more that thinking relationally has become part of this new bottom line and the business world, the industr, has kind of emphasized that. Never has the world of emotion entered the workplace that it does today. I mean, people are talking about psychological safety in the same breath that they're talking about performance indicators.

We talk about authenticity and vulnerability and [00:07:00] trust and transparency and belonging. I mean, when was that the vocabulary from work? Now, of course, I think that there's a cross taking place, a parallel revolution that market economics have also entered romantic life. And we are having a state of emotional capitalism, were many of you are still dating I'm assuming and you know that some of your dates kind of a look like they're a job interview, you know, because we have brought up supply and demand and market economics of you know, a good deal and a bargain and you know, and basically when am I going to find the right one, the right one that's going to make me delete my apps basically? You know, but you can see this kind of parallel revolutions that are taking place between work and home where the vocabularies are becoming more and more fluid and similar with each other.

How many of you live n the same place where you grew up? [00:08:00] Now that is fantastic, one.

Esther: One of the questions I asked to this group was how many of the people there still live and work in the place where they grew up? And there was one person in the entire group, but if they went to their parents or to their grandparents by the time they were three generations back, it was everybody. You entered a factory or a company and you stayed till you went on retirement. People didn't have to think about retention because you just stayed naturally.

Today we don't just leave a marriage because we are unhappy, we leave marriages because we could be happier. But the same thing is true with work. We used to leave when the factory closed and today we leave because our potential isn't being recognized or we are not being promoted enough, because we see both our jobs and our relationships as a place for identity [00:09:00] fulfillment.

Esther: How many of you, your parents lived in the place where they grew up? A few, two or three, five, mmm. And how many of your grandparents lived in the place where they grew up? All right, the mass of people that used to live in the same place lived in a societal structure that was really organized by this word, structure, and structure meant that you had a deep sense of rootedness with tightly made knots that made it very hard for you to leave.

We now, when you are a group, and the majority of you is in a different place, and maybe not even the first place that is different from the one that you grew up, this requires a societal structure that is not about tight knots but that is about loose threads. And that means that we have moved from structure to network [00:10:00]. In the network you make loose traits that allow you to enter and leave easily so that you can connect and disconnect.

Of course, we still want that sense of belonging, but we want to be able to revoke it at any moment. So if people start to talk about retention at work or commitment at work, it means something very different when your workforce has been living in the same place and probably working in the place where it grew up versus all of you.

How am I going to make you stay? How am I going to make you want to be with me? How am I going to make this environment relationally compelling enough for you to feel that you can grow here and put some roots here for a certain time? And how am I going to cultivate that sense of belonging for you when you're going from one gig to the next?...is what many of the people that hire you are wondering.

I think that the shift from structure to network in three generations is huge because in the old model, you [00:11:00] also knew who you were, you knew what was expected of you, you knew the rules were clear, the roles were clear, the boundaries of every relationship was clear, the hierarchy of every relationship was clear.

And now everything is up for negotiation. Everything is a conversation. So you have a lot more freedom. But you also have to continuously know what you think, what you want, what matters to you, where you want to go, what's your next goal, where you want to be, how you want to scale? I mean the burdens of the self have never been heavier.

That's the trade-off you get. You know, we used to have clear structures with little self-expression but a lot of certainty and a good sense of belonging and now we have a lot of freedom, a lot of choice, a lot of options, and everybody and every second book about relationships is all about belonging and about community. Because we tend to write about the thing that is missing, that we need to bolster, you know. [00:12:00] So that for me is a major shift.

And what it means is in the same way that I hear people in the romantic relationship telling me what I'm looking for is the person that's going to help me become the best version of myself. That is an identity model of relationship. Now, I'm not looking for a person with whom I'm going to weather the storm and raise the children and deal with the drought and the economic downfalls and with whom I'm going to just kind of build that no, I want a person gets going to help me become the best version of myself. That's an identity model for relationships.

The same thing is at work. I want a job that's going to give me flexibility so that it can adapt to the uniqueness of my situation. It can help me with my emotional and physical well-being and it can help me meet my psychological and professional growth.

That's an identity model and literally your grandparents lived in a production economy, your parents lived in a service economy and you are living in an identity economy, [00:13:00] In which work and home are becoming the two places that can help you define who you are because identity was always ascribed and people told us who we were and now that we have to figure it out the point is finding those that are going to help us figure out who I am, what I'm about, and when I'm looking for a promotion, I'm not just looking what I'm going to do next, I'm looking to who I'm going to be next. That's an identity economy model.

What's interesting for me in the stories that we told I realized if I say to people this is a podcast that brings together coworkers, co-founders, family business, everybody

instantly translates those words to their own reality. So if you work in the tech company people immediately think co-founder tech company. So let me give you just a glimpse of what I thought [00:14:00] are compelling stories of the workplace.

Two pilots who have been together in Iraq and in Afghanistan, have been inseparable in the cockpit, have developed a level of interdependence and trust on which life and death depends, who then start as co-founders in a company, that company does extremely well and at one point things turn and they are at a crossroads where potentially one of them may want to do something that the other one doesn't want to follow.

How do they separate? And how do they separate when one of them is the eldest of five and the other one is a single son? Do you think that that gives them a different sense of responsibility toward each other? That's a dowry.

And when I have two sisters of which one [00:15:00] has been a successful entrepreneur and has her own company and the other one has been stuck for more than two decades in the company and she basically has confused venting and venture.

You know on occasion she wants to do something but most of the time she complains and the more she complains and the more she activates everybody else around her to give her advice about how she could do better. And the more they give her the advice and the more she defies their advice by basically rendering them as helpless as she is by constantly saying why she can't do what they tell her to do.

And then you begin to understand that power in a relationship doesn't always come from above. Power can come from the weak person and their ability to render all the other powerful competent happy resourceful people completely weak by their inability to raise the person that is so low.

There's a beautiful one, we call them the Brits. But basically it's two people that created a very successful [00:16:00] thriving communications company while the relationship is completely sinking because they are literally incapable of communicating anything to each other. I mean it is page 108 of the manifesto of tight-lip Anglo-Saxon, but they know it, but they have a private communications company. It's like you can't make it up. You know. And one of them is trying to kick the other one out and he says you're inching me out. And it inches you inside as you're hearing it because you can visualize what it's like when one person is so done and the other one is still holding on and that is no different from any other couple that I would see when I am in the role of the couples therapist that works with romantic couples.

A relational system is a relational system. It has the same elements. And what are some of these key elements? Every relational system, every relationship, has to straddle stability and [00:17:00] change, the old and the new, the continuity and the innovation. Everyone. And if you don't change at all you fossilize and you die. So

does a plant, so does a relationship, so does a human being. But if you change all the time you disregulate and you go chaotic and that's not good for you either.

And every relationship has a hierarchy and that starts from the moment you have adults and children and parents and children or caregivers and children, but every relationship has a power structure. There is not a relationship in which there is no dynamic around power. And everyone who's ever had a two-year-old knows that the power can come from the little one.

It's not because you are the big one that you have the power, not at all. And the power can be invisible, and the power can be seductive, and the power can be corrupted and the power can be empowering. It's all of it and every relationship system has [00:18:00] roles, roles. Everybody here has a role. And that role conveys expectations and it conveys how you're going to communicate about these expectations and what people are going to be able to ask from you and therefore what they can trust you for, what they rely on you for, and what are you accountable for.

Everybody has a role. At work, in your social life, with your friends, with your family with your lovers. We are all the time in roles and these roles are basically our identity definition. It's just that these days our roles are changing very very fast and we have continuously to redefine that identity. That's a major change but roles it still is and that's pretty much the scaffolding of relationships. Everything else falls under those three things. Boundaries, roles, hierarchy.

Once you get that Grid, it's no different if you're talking about romantic love or if you're talking about [00:19:00] relationships in the workplace.

Join me in meeting nine pairs who work together. Co-founders, family members, colleagues and co-workers as they unpack and explore the tensions, the unspoken elements of their relationship, the creative energy of their relationship, the loyalties, the break up, the beginnings and the end.

MONTAGE:

Speaker 1: I just I feel continually undermined.

Speaker 2: The job has always been that place where I've been needed and I feel important.

Speaker 3: A lot of the people that work for me are like an extension of my family.

Esther: There's no doubt that your emotional and relational dowry comes with you to work.

Speaker 4: Imagine going to work every day in a very busy place and no one [00:20:00] will make eye contact with you.

Speaker 5: I mean, it feels like a breakup

Esther: It doesn't feel, it is.

Esther: So how's work?