

## HW S2 EP5 MANAGER

**Speaker 1:** [00:00:00] How's Work is an unscripted, onetime counseling session focused on work. For the purposes of maintaining confidentiality, names, employers, and other identifiable characteristics have been removed, but their voices and their stories are real.

**Esther Perel:** [00:00:33] We generally remember the first day we met our manager, the impression they left on us, or the first impression we left on them.

**Employee:** [00:00:45] I was really nervous about having a new manager, feeling really good about my position. I think I had just been promoted. Then this woman comes who's like a bull in a china shop. The day that she came in, she looked so pretty. She had her hair done. And she was kind of like flipping it around and she started making jokes immediately with people. And it just seemed like she got, like, very comfortable very quickly. I remember taking a breath, going, "Oh my god, she's a lot."

**Esther Perel:** [00:01:15] First impressions sometimes are hard to undo, like in this case. The manager, she arrived in full speed and now she has to slow it down. And that's not coming so easy.

**Manager:** [00:01:31] I'd like to think of myself as a servant leader. On the other hand, I'm, like, very passionate, intense, and like, it probably can be tough if you just haven't completely invested in me and jumped on board when I can probably seem like, like a train [laughs] that's just going really fast and doesn't look like I'm stopping any time soon or I'm making space for anybody to jump on.

**Employee:** [00:01:54] It's been up and down. I've, I've likened it to, like, an abusive relationship in the cyclical way of it, where it's like, we are really good for a stretch of time and then something happens and everybody is upset.

**Manager:** [00:02:10] Like, in some ways our relationship is very personal, because like, from the beginning we have discussed what's not working between us, which is, like, intimate. [laughs]

**Esther Perel:** [00:02:20] Their relationship is organized around one word, tumultuous. And tumultuous doesn't just mean negative, but it means intense, intense in every aspect. They appreciate the intensity, and at the same time, they would like to make it slightly less so.

**Manager:** [00:02:39] I mean, I think what was tough is that I had felt like building strong relationships at work was a strength of mine and was feeling like it was a nut I couldn't crack.

**Employee:** [00:02:51] I've grown to really love her just as like a person, but it's just hard. It's very hard to work with her and it hasn't gotten easier. So I feel like definitely conflicted about all of this, because she probably won't feel, like, blindsided by me asking her, like, "Hey, would you want to go on this podcast with me?" But it's definitely like, I don't wish her any ill will or anything like that, you know.

**Esther Perel:** [00:03:18] It's not that common that a manager will accept the invitation of their direct report to come and talk on a therapy podcast, so I keep that in mind and I see this as a very positive sign. But then I realize that they have become so organized around their problem narrative about what's the problems between them. And I just think it's important to meet people before I meet their problems.

So give me a little bit of a sense of who you are, where you work, where you come from.

**Employee:** [00:04:03] So I'm 28 years old, and I am the oldest child of my family. And my mom is white and my dad is Black. And my dad is a Black person who thinks he's white. Um, I have been working in nonprofit for about five years now. And I've been working in the role that I'm for about two and a half years. Um ...

**Esther Perel:** [00:04:32] Tell me what is important in the way that you described your dad. There was a reason for that statement.

**Employee:** [00:04:39] Um, he, it's ... He's been top of mind for me over the last couple days. He voted for Trump, probably I think he did so both times. And, um, I look more like him than I do like my mom. And I am more like him in some ways in terms of wanting to be right or can be, like, argumentative. And I, I guess I just, like, find places where I can just kind of make jabs at my dad, because I don't really talk to him that much. [laughs] So when I say, like, you know, I'm, my dad is this Black man who thinks he's white, it's kind of my way of just being like, "Yeah, fuck you, dad," without like actually saying that to him.

**Esther Perel:** [00:05:13] Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. How about you?

**Manager:** [00:05:18] So I ... My family's from Puerto Rico. I'm 47. My father was a n-, a Philadelphia native, so he's white. My mother was someone who she's only 19 years older than me, so she kind of got herself together when she had me. We got our college degrees at the same time. And, um, and my father is a self-made ... He was a self-made businessman who was raised in an orphanage, so very scrappy parents who made a really great life for themselves. That's where I come from.

**Esther Perel:** [00:05:49] And you say that with admiration.

**Manager:** [00:05:52] Of course, yes. So much admiration and pride. Definitely one of those people that understand I stand on the shoulders of other folks. Um, but in general I've always worked for nonprofits, community-based organizations. So I came in as, um, what they call manager.

**Esther Perel:** [00:06:12] You came in as her manager, okay.

**Manager:** [00:06:14] Mm-hmm [affirmative]. She had someone before me.

**Esther Perel:** [00:06:17] Describe the relationship to me. Either one. And remember, a relationship is a story. So you're gonna tell a story of this relationship. And that sometimes involves how it started or the aspirations, the mistakes, the misunderstandings, the laughters. It has a, it has a whole life in it.

**Manager:** [00:06:43] Hm.

**Employee:** [00:06:45] Um, the first word that came to mind was tumultuous. [laughs] Um, I think that probably the only manager I've had who's made me laugh as much as she does. Um, we have had really, really good times and we've had really, really bad times. And, and I-

**Esther Perel:** [00:07:06] Define good and bad. Those are all-encompassing words. And for you there's a, there's a whole life in each of them.

**Employee:** [00:07:14] Yeah. When I say good I mean like we, we've worked really well together. We don't have too many, um, power struggles going on at the time. We, we produce really great, um, content and work for our teachers. And when it's bad, we are either not communicating or not communicating well. Um, and I'm feeling really impatient and stubborn and also probably not really understood or heard.

**Esther Perel:** [00:07:54] I wondered why she brought in that particular information about her father. But I wasn't thinking about him when they asked that question. I was really thinking about what she was telling me about her and her father that would give me information about her and the manager. And here she gave it to me. "I'm stubborn and I'm impatient."

**Manager:** [00:08:24] Yeah, I think the word that came to mind for me was like a relationship of circumstance. So, you know, when you come in, it's like you build your team or you grow together into, like, new roles, to come in to fill a role that someone else had, that that person brought you on. So that's why I think of circumstance. You know, besides the history you t-, I t-, bring with me as, like, being a woman of color who's always had to prove herself for every leadership role or any role in general and always just takes, assumes I'm gonna have to work harder, so I, I try to. Um, definitely felt a feeling of like, "W-, uh, why do you have this job? Why are you my manager or boss? Why did you get this?" Felt a little bit of that.

**Esther Perel:** [00:09:09] Said she to you in your head?

**Manager:** [00:09:11] I felt that. I felt that. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I mean, we ... There were things said that made me interpret them that way, and so do-, I, I was doing a lot of work of understanding that, like, sometimes people's words in the moment or how they feel in the moment are during adjustment periods and, like, trying not to internalize that a lot, or to, like, behave differently because of that and, and try to work to build, like, trust and a relationship.

Um, I think when it's tough is when we are almost trying to prove the other person wrong more than trying to get back to where we were together. So I think there's definitely many more. That's ... It's more like that now. But I think a lot in the beginning was there was a lot of proving, a lot of proving different ways.

Um, I think when it's good, it just feels like there's trust. And I think the strength is that, like, we have been through a lot of uncomfortable moments and we have also, like, achieved incredible feats in a short amount of time, during COVID at the same time.

So, um, so yeah, I guess tumultuous is a good word as well. I guess for me, for much of that time, I was like, "Okay, this is par for the course if you come into a

new organization in a role that's taking over a different team lead," you know, kind of ready for the push back. I think I didn't think it would take as long or, or, or I thought we would settle into a trusting relationship sooner.

**Esther Perel:** [00:10:45] When you say, "As a woman of color I have to prove myself more," is it different if you oversee a Black woman? Do you feel that ... Did you have an in-, a- an assumption that things would be faster and more complicitous between the two of you?

**Manager:** [00:11:01] Well, in general, like, folks of color are quickly bonded was-

**Esther Perel:** [00:11:07] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Manager:** [00:11:07] ... just my experience. I think part of me expected the same thing. So one, I didn't feel that necessarily on our staff in general. Um, and I do think that there was, like, a little assumptions I made, of course, of how, like, we could connect more quickly. So that's where I took a few steps back of like, "Okay, those are not assumptions that I can just make." And I think-

**Esther Perel:** [00:11:28] Like what?

**Manager:** [00:11:29] That we were just gonna be able ... There were gonna be certain, there were gonna be certain understandings or connections or comfort level or rapport or whatever that is that I might not have otherwise with someone else that wasn't a person of color right off the bat.

**Esther Perel:** [00:11:44] And what did you do with her assumptions? They're well-meaning. They were meant to bring you closer sooner. Um, they were meant to assume a certain level of understanding, of shared reality, of shared struggles, etc. So I'm curious how you took them.

**Employee:** [00:12:03] Yeah, um, I mean, honestly, the whole, like, people of color terminology in general kind of assumes that, like, we are all, you know, familial. And I, I haven't even really felt, like, that familial within the Black community. So looking for it just in the general people of color community has never really been, like, like a thing. And, and I've very recently just started to get in touch with my, like, identity as a Black woman. And the people in my, like, my life that are also Black women, I'm, like, really starting to build relationships with, with them. And it's been, you know, kind of ongoing since, um, towards the end of college,. But I had first of all never been managed by a person of color. Um, my managers from previous jobs were all white men or white women. And I didn't know how to, um, how to accept just a relationship based on our race when we weren't of the same identities, um, especially from someone who is, like, in power in regards to my position.

So at the time, like, I had not known that that's what was happening until she named it. And I was like ... I think probably, like, at, at that time my first instinct was like, "Why would you do that?" Um, and now I'm like, "Obviously you would do that." Like, we're, we're a mi-, a minority in general at our, at our organization. We're starting to ... It's starting to flip, but it was definitely ... It definitely makes sense to me now, but at the time it definitely did not.

**Esther Perel:** [00:13:37] You're saying yes with your head. You're nodding.

**Manager:** [00:13:41] Listening and affirming, yes, yes. It's a small team, so I think that, like, two of the new hires, o- one was me, one was a Black man, um, I think it's a team that's not always in the same office together at the same time, but in general ... Like, right at that time I was the only Latinx person on the team. Um, and there just aren't ... It j-, it was just outnumbered. We were, we were not that diverse of a team.

**Esther Perel:** [00:14:11] Can I ask you something? Do you have a different relationship in the reverse, when your manager is white? There's white woman and ... You've had white woman and white man.

**Employee:** [00:14:25] I would say that I, I have noticed I act differently with white women. With white men, um, I mean, my partner is a white man, and he's probably, like, the only one that I actually, like, respect. [laughs] Um, with white men I generally just, I don't, unless they have proven themselves to be aware of, like, you know, their privilege and, and things like that, I generally don't ... Like, they're just not, like, a really part of, like, my, my, my sphere. Um, but my mom is, like, a white woman. And I have noticed my own ways of being around white women is definitely different than it is with other people.

**Esther Perel:** [00:15:07] And, and in the workplace, how does that manifest?

**Employee:** [00:15:11] Uh, it, it can depend, but for the most part, I don't ... I'm very sensitive to their fragility, [laughs] and, and almost, um, I can be, I don't think protective is the right word, I'm kind of bumbling around that, but that's the word that's popping into my head. So I feel, like, protective of white women. And I, and I hate that. [laughs] I hate that. I don't want that. I don't want that feeling. And so when I'm, when I'm outside of work, it's like, "No, fuck that." But when it's, like, somebody that I'm working with, um, all the white women that I've worked with have really endeared themselves to me in one way or another, and it's made it very hard to just, to, to feel like I can be very blunt or straightforward or even, like, angry or, um, at-, like, aggressive in any way. I'm sure that there's something to it, because of my mom. [laughs] And I'm also sure that there's, like, I don't want to be a s-, Black woman stereotype of any kind. So there's definitely, like, some of that there too.

**Esther Perel:** [00:16:29] Had we continued the conversation, I would have wanted to explore further with her the legacy of the white mother with whom she can't identify because of color, and of the Black father with whom she can't identify because of values and identity. And maybe it would have shed more light to understand her relationship to the white managers, men and women, and to the current manager, another woman of color. But it's not only the legacy of her parents. It's also the cultural and racial legacy and the bind that she finds herself in as a Black woman who does not want to be seen as the stereotype of the Black woman.

So what happens? You arrive, and then what happens?

**Manager:** [00:17:34] It was kind of a tough entry for us and them, because it's kind of like, oh, so pe-, these people are coming in as new leadership and making it seem like nothing we did was that great before. And then we were kind of coming in like, "What's all the resistance? Like, we're just here trying to, like, be part of

the team and get work done." So that was, like, the overall a-, um, to-, from my perspective, like, the overall vibe for a while.

**Employee:** [00:17:58] It was very much like, like it wasn't ... There wasn't a lot of, like, of a learning period I think. Both of them came in and just had to hit the ground running. And th-, and that was tough, because I did. Like I had a, a nice, like, [laughs] two-month period where I was learning. I went to a conference within, like, my first two weeks to learn more about my role. So I would say that, that there was not as much, um ... It didn't feel like from our perspective, me and other people who had been on the team, that there was a lot of curiosity when they were coming in. It was more like, "Okay, well we just, we're told that this is what we need to do, so we're gonna get started with our ways of thinking and being." And it was, it was tough.

**Esther Perel:** [00:18:40] The one thing that stood out in, in what you just described was, um, a way of seeing not just what was happening to you and to the rest of the team, but also what basically was demanded of these new people who were coming in. And, uh, when I hear anybody who is able to look above them and feel for the people above them and understand the predicaments that they are in and the fact that everyone is involved in certain power structures basically, everybody's accountable to somebody, and the person above you is a person below somebody else, um, that in itself stands out immediately, that you, that you saw it. It's easy to see what's being done to me. It's not so clear sometimes that what's being done to me is the consequence of other things that are being done to you or told to you or demanded from you or expected from you, same.

You, you arrive, and, um, and you basically, you indeed have to start to prove yourself immediately. Um, so you look for shortcuts. And one of the shortcuts is to assume familiarity. Another shortcut is to basically not spend enough time learning what, how things are being done and why they're done the way they're done, because we need to simply change something. And another shortcut is to not take enough time to build a relationship necessarily, because we've got shit to get done. We've got a mandate. We need to ful- fulfill, fulfill the, you know, the requirements here. And you seem to have done that actually. You've actually done a terrific job. And so now you kind of go back and you say, "Okay, we've done the work. [laughs] But now let's go see what happened to the people," because if the people don't get along, they can't fully celebrate the work they've done either.

And what you're also saying is that it goes from high to low, that sometimes you really feel like, you know, "We connected. We got it. We're, we're in this together. We laugh together, all of it," and, um, and that s-, that it actually is a very personal relationship, and, and that it then goes equally to the other side, but with intensity. And when people experience that kind of intensity in the workplace in a very short amount of time, it's because each one actually evokes something for the other. So then you start to ask, you know, what is it about this behavior that triggers you, that make-, that engenders a reaction in you, you know? And, and, and when else have you felt this? Because it's so immediate, you know, so soon that you don't like it, that the not liking it was learned somewhere else.

**Employee:** [00:21:29] Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Esther Perel:** [00:21:30] It doesn't just come from these two people. So that's a question I have is like, what was it that each of them kind of, kind of felt that, that the other one was, was pressing somewhere, and, um, didn't necessarily know that they were pressing, nor what they were pressing, but they knew they were pressing. That make sense?

**Employee:** [00:21:57] Yes. [laughs]

**Esther Perel:** [00:22:05] When I try to understand the tension between these two people who work together, I continuously straddle three levels: what is organizational, what is interpersonal or relational, and what is personal or individual. What does each woman bring with her from her own history of relationships? What is being triggered between the two of them? And what is actually the consequence of something that is organizational and systemic, present in the room, although invisible?

Now tell me how. [laughs]

**Employee:** [00:22:46] [laughs] That, it just, it resonates a lot, um, with the, with the first day that I remember just, like, thinking, "Oh my god, she's a lot," and then she would, like, refer to herself as, like, a bull in a china shop. And, and that is something that, like, I've come to appreciate, but I'm now very curious about why that affected me so, because it really did influence the, just the ways that I showed up in spaces, in conversations with her afterwards and-

**Esther Perel:** [00:23:17] You know other bulls in china shops?

**Employee:** [00:23:22] My sister. [laughs] My sister. Um, yeah.

**Esther Perel:** [00:23:28] Describe the bull, or the china shop. [laughs] You can do both.

**Employee:** [00:23:32] [laughs] Um, my y-, my sister who I'm referring to is two years younger than me. But she is very, like, uh, "Look at me." And she's beautiful. [laughs] And we are, like, when we're all together, we are all very loud and very boisterous and fun. But she can definitely get ... Like, she has, like, a temper and she can be very stubborn. And she has to have her way. Um, she's not very great at listening sometimes. [laughs] She, when she's insecure about something, it's very, um ... She displays it in a way that is like ... It's almost like angry, angry about it. Like, she hasn't ... She didn't go to college.

I was, I'm the only one of, of my siblings who went to college. And I was the, like, quiet one, where I was, I had my head in a book at all times. Um, my dad used to, like, compare all of my siblings to me and be like, "Why aren't you reading? Um, why don't you just sit down and be quiet?" For, like, up until, uh, probably when I got to college, when I started to come out of my shell a little bit more, I was definitely more withdrawn.

**Esther Perel:** [00:24:38] What are you learning as you listen to this?

**Manager:** [00:24:43] Some I've, some I've ... Sh- she shared some of it with me a little bit. Um, I did not know about her kind of being the most bookish and, and, uh, and a little bit of, like, what I'm picking up on possibly is kind of getting lost in

the shuffle a little bit too with all of these other bigger voices that she had around her and how they expressed what they needed and how they needed.

**Esther Perel:** [00:25:10] Yes?

**Employee:** [00:25:12] I'm trying to let that sit with me for a second and see if it resonates, you know.

**Esther Perel:** [00:25:17] Mm.

**Employee:** [00:25:20] Definitely, um, I definitely could see, I think as I moved f-, away from home and learned d-, about just different things, like I've definitely found more of a, a voice and a willingness to speak up about things at home, but most of the time I'm, I'm happy to just kind of be in the midst of my family being, like, loud and buzzing around. And that's usually fine.

**Esther Perel:** [00:25:43] How does that training come to work with you?

**Employee:** [00:25:49] I don't have a lot of ... It's not in my nature I guess to climb the ladder towards, like, promotions and things like that. I'm happy to be in a room learning and not as much leading or facilitating. Um, I love being on a team, and there's this duality where I, I have, I'm starting to have opinions and give voice to them more than I have ever really done in my life. But also I, I'm really happy to just sit back and, and listen.

**Esther Perel:** [00:26:25] Do you experience her as more shy, withdrawn, and ha-, pleased to be on the team, happy to learn, but not necessarily to claim? And how do you manage that? Do you have a view of her as capable of so much more, and if she only, you know, takes that seat at the table?

**Manager:** [00:26:50] That's pretty much right on the money, um, how I feel. I see a lot and expect a lot and want her to expect a lot for herself too, because I've seen what she can do. I feel like I want to leave as much space for her to see that in herself and want to grow, but also feel like I don't want to back off just because I get pushed away. Um, sometimes I also feel like I'm really aware that, like, I've never felt like I could just sit back and not, and just take in what's going on and not have to, one, either perform or participate, you know. So I also see, like, just a dif-, you know, a difference in that, and also appreciate, like I've said to her before, I appreciate what a good listener she is and how good she is at, like, listening, taking it all in, and then having an assessment or an opinion.

**Esther Perel:** [00:27:52] Where did you get the training of, "I can't sit still. I have to act. I have to make things happen. I can't just be a passive witness."

**Manager:** [00:28:02] Yeah. I think, you know, to have a mom who didn't have a high school degree and had me as a teenager and then a dad who dropped out of or-, a-an orphanage at 18 to, like, work and then build their own business, it's, I almost feel like there's something in the, like, if, if you're not proactive and working in that way, like, you are left to a less fortunate situation. You know, I do-, I f-, think it's called ... I think it's survival and progress. I think for a long time I understood survival and progress to mean that you can't ever sit back and that if you don't take control of something, like, you're going to be at the mercy of someone else's decisions.

**Esther Perel:** [00:28:50] And how does that enter into the dynamic between the two of you?

**Manager:** [00:28:56] That I'm urgent about many things.

**Esther Perel:** [00:29:04] I got it.

**Manager:** [00:29:06] [laughs]

**Esther Perel:** [00:29:06] [laughs] I mean, I, I didn't get it, but I just had a thought. [laughs] But I'm gonna wait. Go ahead.

**Manager:** [00:29:12] No, go. Please, share.

**Esther Perel:** [00:29:13] No, it's just suddenly so. It's like, you, you know, in your world, you don't wait, you don't sit, because it's the difference between, you know, moving ahead, creating a life, having protection, versus being at the back. And in your world, part of what gave you your strength is that you may have been quiet, but you listen and you think things through. You don't jump. You are deliberate. In fact, both of you, in front of a certain precariousness, have a different response. One of you says, "Things are not sure. Let me watch and sit and study this." And the other one says, "Things are not sure. I can't just sit here. I gotta act, and fast." That's what suddenly came to me. Does any of this resonate?

**Manager:** [00:30:13] Yeah.

**Employee:** [00:30:14] Yeah.

**Manager:** [00:30:14] 100%.

**Esther Perel:** [00:30:15] 100%?

**Employee:** [00:30:16] Yes.

**Esther Perel:** [00:30:16] I, I just felt this suddenly. I just thought, you know, I, I saw you in your younger versions, and then I see how it enters into the workplace direct, and then you feel that she's pushy when you don't like it in the, in the, in the lows, and she thinks you're too slow and passive and not, and not, uh, and not what? What's the word for you?

**Manager:** [00:30:42] Sometimes I think interested. I know that like I'm just ... Yeah, sometimes I think not interested.

**Esther Perel:** [00:30:48] Why? Because, but that's an af-, that's like, "If she was really interested, she would already have done this. She hasn't done done this means that she may not be interested enough."

**Manager:** [00:30:56] Or see it in a certain way. Often what we might think what ... We differ on what we, what focus we think we should be taking.

**Esther Perel:** [00:31:04] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Manager:** [00:31:04] So I think that's what impacts it as well. Um, it's like I feel like I'm like, "We gotta make it happen." And I think then sh- she's like, "Let's see what

happens, and then we're gonna do this." Right, so I feel like that's how I would translate that into my own words.

**Esther Perel:** [00:31:21] Mm-hmm [affirmative]. How would you put it?

**Employee:** [00:31:23] Hm. I mean, that, it, it all sounds right. I'm, I definitely am, like, resisting [laughs] the, um, the, the, the mold. Like, I don't want to be like this. Like, I don't want that to be the idea of me. But I think it's I can't deny it. Like, it's definitely a thing that I am ... I j-, I named about myself. Like, I am, I do want to see how things play out. Um, I, I try to be thoughtful before making decisions and, um, moving forward with things. And I, and I, and I cling to, like, just feeling safe about, about things, I think.

**Esther Perel:** [00:32:08] So I mean, this, this is an interesting lens. It's not a definition of you. It s-, describes an aspect of you. There's so many others. Let's not reduce ourselves to one thing. But it probably is one of the things that stands in the way of your tensions. That's why I picked on this one, because it, you can feel it. It's energetic. I, I, I hear you talk about how you gotta take things in hand, you gotta make things move, you're ... And, and then I suddenly felt when, when you have that energy, I can imagine that the tension comes, because on the other side is someone that says, "Wait a minute." Those two stances create an interesting dance. It's stance, stance, dance, [laughs] says my colleague, Terry Real. This is it, you have a stance, you have a stance, and together this becomes a dance. So now let's describe the dance. And I'm gonna listen to you talk to each other actually.

I listen to the core beliefs that both of the women are highlighting, each specifying her own survival strategy, "I must act. I must not react." One says, "I must act. I can't sit idle." And the other says, "I have to be careful not to react." One finds clarity in thinking with some categories and structure, and the other finds resistance in being labeled, in feeling confined by words that are more general and don't capture the uniqueness of her individuality. Both of them though have really nuanced understandings of each other and of themselves. But they're caught in this dance at this moment that I hear very, very often, expectations from the manager to not just be a manager that looks at the work being done and the deliverables, but looks at my growth, my sensibility, my emotional health, etc. And the manager who is asking, "How do we set up expectations and parameters without having to be a therapist at all time?"

If I see you discuss something, it doesn't have to be the most difficult thing, I will see the moves of the dance basically.

**Employee:** [00:34:57] Hm.

**Esther Perel:** [00:34:59] And not just I will see. We will see.

**Employee:** [00:35:02] [laughs] Um, I mean, one that came to mind was, like, hiring. Like, um, where there would be, like, hiring fairs. And like, at the last minute there would be one-off interviews or, um, we would, like, schedule hiring fairs that weren't originally a part of the plan, and that just would feel really chaotic for me. Um, so that's just a f-, like, that's a situation that came to mind that I wonder if it would apply here.

**Manager:** [00:35:35] Well I think I would say that if I'm thinking about how we're gonna do it again this year, I want to know what is gonna make you more comfortable with those types of moves, because we have to make them. So I'm open to being like, what would make ... What would you like to try to still meet that need, but it not make, like, your hi-, you feel like the hiring fair's chaotic?

**Employee:** [00:36:04] It's not gonna not feel chaotic, so my, my thought of this was almost like I don't want to lead it. I don't want to, like, be the one in charge of it if it's gonna be something that's like, that I feel like I can't control or just, like, have some feeling of, like, this is, this has an order to it. And I don't think that that means it shouldn't happen that way, because ultimately what you did worked. It's just that I, I, I'm happy to just, like, not be the lead on it, not be the person scheduling things and holding people accountable to RSVPing and things like that if I just know that that's not something we're gonna do. And, and I'll just help with tech support.

**Manager:** [00:36:52] I mean, I think I'd want to push and be like ... Two things I would say is, one, like, the hiring fair should run ... There's a lot of ways it should run exactly how you've run it. What I'm interested in are some tweaks that also meet the needs of the people that we're serving. So it's like, I don't know how I can frame it for you so that, like, it doesn't feel like a tweak is ruining your entire system. M-, and maybe the other opt-, or another option too is like, telling you what it is that we're thinking about we need, and being like, okay, so given these things, how would you tweak the way the syst-, the, the way the hiring process goes now to still serve this other need, versus telling you how I want us, you to serve it. Like, I, I would want us to play at least, like, two of those out, before we just decide, like, you're not gonna be on it or you're only gonna do tech support, because one, I don't think, I don't think that's sustainable for our team to, like, get everything we need to get done. And then two, I just think, like, you are more than just tech support.

**Employee:** [00:38:00] [laughs] Mm.

**Esther Perel:** [00:38:05] Do you know that what she would like to hear from you is not what you cannot do, but what you would like to learn to do better?

**Employee:** [00:38:17] No. But I mean, that's ...

**Esther Perel:** [00:38:21] The place here goes to then she starts to think you're not interested, which I don't think is what you mean. But you're talking about what, no to this, no to that, can't here, can't there. And what she wants is to sense an energy. It's the energy of getting it done that we were just talking about before. She wants a little bit more of that energy.

**Employee:** [00:38:51] Hm.

**Manager:** [00:38:53] Yeah. I mean, I think give me something I can work with is how I'm thinking about it. I feel like it, I feel like it's like you don't want it to be different or you don't want it to change, because I'm doing it, if I'm gonna be really, like ... If, like, that's, so that's where it starts to get, like, a tug, because I'm like, I want opportunities to think of it of a different way, but it kind of feels like a little

bit of what I walked into also in a bigger sense of like, if we can't keep doing it this way, then I don't want to do it at all.

**Esther Perel:** [00:39:25] And then you have to do it.

**Manager:** [00:39:27] And then I have to do it. That's honestly what's happening in my head is that, that I'm gonna have to find other ways to do it or, uh, you know, because ultimately it still has to get ... It still has to happen. It still has to get done. And, and then I honestly never want you cut out of anything that we would do as a team. Like, one, you're an asset. Two, that's not a good look for you. I don't want anything that's not a good look for you.

**Esther Perel:** [00:39:51] Tell me, have you had experience with, in helping her in infusing some confidence?

**Manager:** [00:40:03] I mean, I don't know what that, exactly what you mean by that, but I feel like, yeah, I feel, I feel like a ... I don't know if I can infuse confidence in her. I feel like I try to express the observations in times where I feel confident in her.

**Esther Perel:** [00:40:21] Same.

**Manager:** [00:40:21] Um-

**Esther Perel:** [00:40:21] Yes.

**Manager:** [00:40:22] With-, yeah, without, because, like, I never want to patronize you. I always want to have high expectations, because I'm always clear of, like, how awful it feels when you, there's high expectations feels terrible too. Um, so I'm always trying to have that dance.

**Esther Perel:** [00:40:38] How are you receiving that?

**Employee:** [00:40:41] Uh, I am struggling. [laughs] I'm struggling. I, I, I'm thinking about the times where I think I feel like I was, um, energetic or, like, about it, and it, and it was, it was misinterpreted as not believing or not buying in when it was like, I'm asking questions or I'm trying to offer, like, my f-, like, feedback, or just thinking, like, "This, this to me doesn't make sense." So I don't ... Like, I would rather retry something else.

So I'm, I'm just struggling with the, the feelings that I've, that I've had in the past, having brought me to this point of just tell me what to do and I'm gonna do it, because whenever I pushed back or whenever I tried to become energetic or offer something, it was met with what felt like, "No no no, like, this is ... That's not what we want. We ... " And it was always just, like, a f-, like a fight. Um, so I'm just like, "Well fuck it then. I'm just not gonna, like, do that anymore. I'm not gonna push back. I'm not gonna, like, pressure test things if it's just gonna feel like I'm, like, starting a fight or causing a, an argument or something like that."

So th- that's ... Those are, these are things that are, are kind of just like going in my head right now because I'm, I, I do want to feel like I, I'm ... I want to feel like I'm an asset to the team. Most days I, I just feel tired. [laughs]

**Manager:** [00:42:20] I hear. I'm hearing it. I'm, I'm processing it. And I think that, and we can look at like, what you're saying is pu- push back or coming, being excited about something, and like, what I perceive it as, like, uh, if there's misses in that as well. Um, yeah.

**Esther Perel:** [00:42:44] What did you hear her say?

**Manager:** [00:42:47] That the words that I heard were like that when she has other thoughts or has other ideas or expresses another way, or why she wants, why she's invested in the way that it is being done if I'm asking for something different that she doesn't feel like that's embraced, that that is kind of pushed aside.

**Esther Perel:** [00:43:07] Or that it becomes the source of a battle.

**Manager:** [00:43:10] It definitely becomes the source of a battle.

**Esther Perel:** [00:43:12] You, and you, you see that?

**Manager:** [00:43:15] Yes.

**Esther Perel:** [00:43:16] You see it as well?

**Manager:** [00:43:17] I see it. I know it.

**Esther Perel:** [00:43:19] Okay. So you, you agree on, on that, on the-

**Manager:** [00:43:24] Yes.

**Esther Perel:** [00:43:24] ... on the, on what happens, because it's a very different answer that's ... I'm not just not engaged. I've chosen to not be engaged when my experience has been that if I do bring that energy, m- my questioning, my discussing, um, is experienced or is responded to as if it's a, as if we're in an argument.

**Manager:** [00:43:49] I think there are time- ... I think that if I'm not feeling like the questions have to do with, like, how to do this better, and if I'm feeling like the questions have to do with, like, resisting change, you're right, I, I am taking that. I'm responding to that differently than I might to, like, new ideas or problem solving.

**Esther Perel:** [00:44:11] So go a step further. Sometimes you can experience her questions as curiosity and engagement and sometimes you experience her statements as resistance and rigidity. Like, she, she closes off and you can't ... You know. But the more she goes there, that way, for you, that's when you start to chisel away.

**Manager:** [00:44:34] I have no choice. That's how it feels. I know that I need to develop [laughs] my own skills, but in that moment it feels like I have no choice, because like, I can't let this stop us. And that's kind of like the narrative that happens in my head, that creates what Esther's talked about, that I feel like I need to chisel away, which can't possibly be a pleasant experience for ...

**Employee:** [00:44:59] I would not say that it was pleasant. [laughs]

**Esther Perel:** [00:45:02] But you're ... It's, that's the fact. And do you see how the chisel machine gets activated?

**Employee:** [00:45:11] Yes.

**Esther Perel:** [00:45:12] Because I think that part of what you're doing so beautifully here is to get a sense as to how each of you in some way elicits some reaction in the other person, by virtue of your own behavior. And both of you agree. You know, there's a shared sense of reality here. It's not like one o-, you have completely separate stories and you kind of wonder if this is happening to the same people. So there are times when you actually do succeed very well in bringing her in, where she engages from the place of, "How can we do this?" rather than, "I can't do it. I won't do it." Let's study those. What have you done then, each of you, by the way, that made you be able to bypass the impasse?

**Employee:** [00:46:02] [laughs] Well, the first thing that came to mind was that when I've had a good night's sleep, [laughs] things generally go better. Um, I, like ... When I, when I'm taking better care of myself, I feel better overall. And that's one thing that I have not been doing a lot of for a long time. Um, and I do, I do feel, like, a sense of ownership for when things did not go so great. Um, and, and I think that when things did go well, it was coming from both of us more. Um ...

**Esther Perel:** [00:46:53] And why has it been challenging for you to take care of yourself?

**Employee:** [00:46:58] I have [laughs] self-diagnosed, uh, depression. I have, I have been, uh ... I have consistently just, you know, gained weight over the last five years since I moved from my home to where I am now. Um, and I am very comfortable with being comfortable. I don't overextend myself in my personal life to many regards. If I don't want to do something, I don't do it. If I want something, I get it. And that's just kind of like, I feel so disgusting, like, saying that out loud. And, but that's just, like, what my life has been like, especially during quarantine, but really leading up to that, as I started to have, like, my own financial, like, independence and stability and just freedom really from, like, my mom, my family, um-

**Esther Perel:** [00:47:51] Say more. There's more there.

**Employee:** [00:47:55] I am not the same person that I was when I lived at home. When I go home I have to pretend like I am still that person, that I can't show too much of, like, who I am. So COVID has definitely allowed me to just, just be, just be, um, be at home and just not ... I wouldn't say that relax is even a word, because I haven't been relaxed. Um, I've been working. I've been not taking care of myself. I've ... When I've had opportunities to take care of myself, I play video games instead or something like that. Um, I think when I, when I had discipline, [laughs] when I've had any semblance of discipline for myself or self-control, I was probably, probably in ... I would say the latest was college, but the last one I really remember was high school when I had to get to school on time or else I would've been kicked out again. I had to get up and get my mom awake so, and give her, and make her coffee. And those were the times where I remember, like, having to be disciplined. And then once I started to get out of the house and not have to do

those things, it just, discipline flew out the window. And with that, any sense of, like, urgency to get back to it.

**Esther Perel:** [00:49:22] What do you learn from that? And thank you for telling.

**Manager:** [00:49:27] Yeah, thank you for sharing that. I mean, I've learned that if you, one, it's, that how hard it is to not feel like you can be who you are when you're home with your family. Um, and, and, and then also how it would just feel so uncomfortable to feel like somebody else in this other setting is imposing or in some way wanting you to do anything outside of what you're comfortable with. It's almost like you're a little spent.

**Esther Perel:** [00:50:01] Yeah. And I was also thinking, you know, what is the responsibility of a manager towards the health and mental health of your direct reports? How much is it important to know? How much do you need to take that into consideration? How much-

**Manager:** [00:50:21] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Esther Perel:** [00:50:22] How much does that go to work? What is the relationship here between the personal and the professional? And probably you, without knowing, you know the days when she has slept well and the days when she has spent her nights on video games. You, you, we don't necessarily know why, but you know the difference. Uh-

**Manager:** [00:50:47] Yes. And I, and I, and I do think, like, there are times that it's been more pleasant and less battle I think are when, like, that part of me kicks in too, where I'm like, "Take the time you need or do the thing you need to do," because I do value so much, like, your well-being and your health and mental health. And so like, if you talk about when is it right, Esther, I feel like we definitely have that compassion for each other-

**Esther Perel:** [00:51:13] Beautiful.

**Manager:** [00:51:14] ... that is, like, really there. Like, I've, I've had to have s-, two surgeries during COVID. I've had several deaths in my family. And like, she's just compassionate and understanding and picks up whatever she needs to pick up because of that. And I try and hope that she's felt ... I think she's felt the same for me, so I think if you-

**Esther Perel:** [00:51:34] She's nodding.

**Manager:** [00:51:34] That's just, like, what works. Yes.

**Esther Perel:** [00:51:35] [crosstalk 00:51:36].

**Manager:** [00:51:35] If what works, like, that's definitely, we are both very, um, in tune with our humanity and, like, the humanity of others.

**Esther Perel:** [00:51:54] The manager is a caring and empathic person, and she wants to know about the mental health of her employee. At the same time, she wonders, what is her responsibility. To what extent does she need to adapt her expectations when her worker tells her that they spent a weekend playing video games? This is one of the foundational questions in the moment about management

as an empathic guide versus management who makes sure that their deliverables are up to date.

Let me ask you something else. You work with teachers who work in school with dire needs. Do you ever discuss that aspect of your work, the, the, the, the real bigger reasons of what's compelling about this here? You graduate at the same time as your mother from college. You are the only one in your family who went to college. This is an important subject in your lives, for both of you. Do you ever have those conversations, that actually remind you why you're there?

**Manager:** [00:53:16] We don't. You know, I'm so glad that you were able to, like, align where our experiences could be similar, because I think a lot of times those conversations go into where, like, where it appears that we have completely different experiences or think about the work in such different ways. Um, but I think that we, in many ways, we do have experiences that don't differ, in some ways, you know, so much, and it would ... I would love to talk about, like, how we feel and think about the work that we do and, and how we're still here.

**Esther Perel:** [00:53:57] I want to highlight, as she says, the places where they align. And especially education. Their shared passion for the opportunity that education has provided them and could provide to the many students that they work with. And so I think that the best way to end this conversation is one of my favorite questions.

What's one of the best teachers you had?

**Employee:** [00:54:37] I would say probably when I was in high school I had ... I was in this AP psychology class, and he p-, he noticed everything that happened in the classroom. And he could tell immediately when I became disengaged, when I would just start, like ... I would usually sit in the back of the classroom. And he could tell when I would start to, like, drift off into my brain. And he would just call me back. [laughs] Uh, and just clearly he really cared about, like, the students actually being a part of what was going on in this learning.

**Esther Perel:** [00:55:15] So a good teacher starts with a teacher you remember. You remember the best and the worst of the teachers-

**Employee:** [00:55:18] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Esther Perel:** [00:55:23] ... that we've had, right? But that to me, if you had more of those conversations, social justice training of new teachers, what makes a good teacher, how do you become a teacher that's remembered, what does it mean for these teachers to come out of college right now and to suddenly be-, go and teach virtually. I mean, it's like the weirdest thing they've ever ... Nobody thought about that. Your passion for education, what education has meant for you, to me, if you include those things in your work and in your conversations, it will change your relationship.

**Speaker 1:** [00:56:19] Esther Perel is a therapist, bestselling author, speaker, and host of the podcasts *Where Should We Begin* and *How's Work*. To apply with a colleague or partner to do a session for the podcast or to follow along with each episode's show notes, go to [howswork.estherperel.com](https://howswork.estherperel.com). *How's Work* is produced by Magnificent Noise for Gimlet and Esther Perel Productions. Our production staff

includes Eric Nuzum, Eva Wolchover, Hiwote Getaneh, and Kristen Mueller. Original music and additional production by Paul Schneider. And the executive producers of How's Work are Esther Perel and Jesse Baker. We would also like to thank Lydia Polgreen, Colin Campbell, Courtney Hamilton, Nick Oxenhorn, Sarah Kramer, Jack Saul, and the entire Esther Perel Global Media Team.