Mervyn Dinnen 0:18

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I'm going to start with a question: for people working in HR and people working in business everywhere, are you baffled by other people, surprising and sometimes difficult, conflicting or even toxic behavior? Do you know how to deal at work with pessimists, bureaucrats under performers, people who talk over you, people who take credit for your work, micro managers and the like? It is an issue, and today I'm going to be talking about that on the podcast with my good friend and award winning author, Zena Everett, who has written two books: "The Crazy Busy Cure" and today, we are talking about her new book called "Badly Behaved People," which has just been published, in which she talks about the complexities of everyday people problems and how to resolve them. Zena, welcome to the HR Means Business podcast, and would you like to fully Introduce yourself?

Zena Everett 2:05

Oh, I can't do it better than I can't do it better than what you said, Mervyn, obviously, but I I'm a leadership coach. I'm an ex recruiter like you. Moved into coaching and then got really interested in the whole idea of crazy busyness and how people are all crazy busy, and then when I realized they're crazy busy, of course, I realized that crazy busyness crowds out dialog and and you don't need me to tell you this, it's a kind of complex landscape to work in. So we've got remote teams, we've got multi generational workforces, we've got rapidly changing technology ecosystems and all that stuff means there's lots of space for bad behavior because people aren't communicating properly. So I put together a whole load of I think there's 15 case studies in the book which are true stories, but they're composites to protect the innocent, as they say, of real stories, although I think I allude to actually somebody that we both know in one situation, one topic, about managers behaving badly, because I remember that you had a manager many moons ago. Did you know what I'm going to say? He used to take this off.

Mervyn Dinnen 3:34

He used to want?

Zena Everett 3:38

He used to take his socks off.

Mervyn Dinnen 3:42

Oh yes, yes!

Zena Everett 3:44

Which I think in a kind of which, I think in kind of office bad behavior that's pretty, up in the top. So, so Mervyn and I, Dear Readers, Dear Listeners, we are in the day when, I mean, we both knew people who, you know, threw their laptops around. And I was chatting to somebody just this morning about this, and she said recently some and she was a C level person. She said somebody threw their computer cable at me in a meeting, their laptop cable so, you know, we like to think this stuff doesn't happen, but it does. But yeah, so that person, we won't, we won't mention any names, but I often think back at that person, he was an interviewer and would take their socks off and pick their toes while they interviewed.

Mervyn Dinnen 4:40

Very different, very, very different times. Having identified, of course, you and I had a chat on the HRMS business podcast a year or two ago about productivity drag and crazy busyness. What, I suppose, first prompted you to start researching this kind of, you know, the complexity of people problems and all the different characters that form a workplace, and whose responsibility it is, I suppose to seek harmony?

Zena Everett 5:13

Well, I that's such a brilliant question. Um, I guess I'm naturally curious about people and why we behave in the way that we do, but I had done as part of my psychological coaching training, I had done the transaction analysis, parent, adult, child. And I think model, and I think that so that that whole idea of, look, it's not you and it's not me, it's the transactional relationship between the two, two of us, you know, my behavior makes you behave in that way. That's what I found interesting. And I guess in my coaching sessions, I'd say to people, you know, they come to me with a story, and I'd say, "Well, have you told them that's how you feel?" And they go, "Oh, no, I haven't done that. No, told them no." And then equally, I have somebody else's story, and I'd say to them, "Well, have you asked them what's behind that?" And they'd say, "Oh, are you allowed to ask", you know? And I thought this is interesting, that actually people don't seem to have the dialog anymore to actually say, you know, how are you? And let's have a chat. And then this is a multi-part answer to your question. I think what really did it was I was at a corporate away weekend. Now, admittedly, the head of the team worked in a different country for many of the other people that were there, sort of as a cross cultural, cross border thing. But I said, "oh! x is really looking forward to her wedding coming up this month." And he said, "Oh," you know, I'm going to say, don't you, yeah, "Is X getting married?" And you know this, this x was a, an absolute star performer. And he really should have known, you know, he really should have known, because it's not like she was a private person who was hanging back. She was, you know, boiling over. It just took a simple How are you, what's going, you know, what's happening for her to tell all. And I thought, right, this is really interesting. This whole thing, we have no time to get to know each other anymore. And of course, like I said, it's a complex landscape and remote teams. It's a big problem with that, because how do you create that space when there isn't a water cooler moment?

Mervyn Dinnen 7:34

We'll be talking about kind of remote, flexible, hybrid and asynchronous in a few minutes. I mean in terms of thinking about people working in HR, particularly, I suppose, people at senior levels in HR, how can they tread the line between creating or ensuring there is a harmonious working environment without getting, I was going to say too personal, but I mean too involved with possibly, you know, people's different personalities? People's different you know, as I I said at the beginning of this, you talk in the book about a whole range of, you know, explosive personalities, complainers, control freaks, manipulators, gossips. What I mean, firstly, should HR be involving themselves in all of this, and saying, "Look, we need everybody to work together," and there's too much I suppose conflict or difference, or is it something that they need to I suppose identify from the very beginning can be an issue, and almost from the start, of people joining or teams coming together, begin to ensure that there is harmony.

Zena Everett 8:44

What, what I've noticed is that managers don't necessarily know they don't really know the person, the complex human behind the workplace; the work face; the person behind the role. So they are therefore surprised when they behave in ways that they wouldn't behave because they don't know enough about their backstory, and they don't know about what's going on in their lives. So a very simple example is that, you know, the whole idea of the stress bucket that there's we can all handle different amounts of stress, but all of us reach the top of that bucket, ceiling on the bucket, the lid on the bucket, and something can happen that tips us over the edge. So, we have an uncharacteristic response. A very basic example of that, as you know, there's that research that one in four teenagers is likely to experience some sort of mental health episode. You know now they're caregivers or parents in the workplace, are not going to have a lot of resilience left for a work stress so then they might blow over uncharacteristically. So I think what HR should be doing. Is encouraging people to their managers and leaders, to find pockets of time just to slow things down and talk to people. Now, obviously it's not a box ticking exercise. It's a human emotional intelligence exercise, and people are under no obligation to tell, to share any information if they don't want to, but you kind of need to have an opportunity to listen to what people are telling you and what they're not telling you. So, I think that's very important. The other thing, the real moral of the story, apart from actually listening, and I do mean that there's so much talk on listening and a kind of, right, I've listened in the one to one now it's now we I don't have to do that now till next month, which I hear a lot about. But there's also the moral of the story is that the people in the book, apart from one, are actually not badly behaved at all. They're just misunderstood. You know, they are responding defensively, and that's usually because they aren't talking enough to each other to say, you know, in this situation, I'm responding in that way. And, you know, I coach somebody. I used to be a coach at side business school at Oxford, on the exec MBA program, and I had this amazing woman. I mean, these people were wonderful. Had this amazing woman. And she said, I find it really difficult to speak up. And she said, and actually, it's because I was taught you can't be, as a woman, you cannot be this smartest person in the room, you know. So she had to unlearn that stuff. So now her CEO must have, at one stage, thought, I really need to hear from this person. Why have I hired them? You know, she's smarter than everybody else here, you know, and then some, and she's not speaking up in the room. And they might not have anticipated, actually, that's the reason, you know, it wouldn't have crossed their minds that that's the reason they had to unlearn stuff. So that's a very long answer to a very long question. People are complex. We're not robots. You know, we're not robots. We are messy, complicated human beings. And sometimes, you know, they are the you know, the roughty, Tufty Sales Director opposite you is behaving like a six year old, because, actually, they're vulnerable, so they are working in ways that kept them safe when they were young. You know, it goes right back to the cave. So there's so I think what I'm saying is that managers, we really they have to work on that seesaw between being great at their technical experts, but they really need to dial up the emotional landscape in their emotional intelligence. I mean, in this complex kind of landscape that we're trying to to work in.

Mervyn Dinnen 12:54

In a work environment, I mean it, I could understand that one way is by, I suppose, getting to know so much more about the people you're working with, and if you're a manager, the people who you're responsible for. Isn't there a, I suppose, a fine line between what people are willing to offer, particularly in a work environment, and what, you know, if we're saying that the manager or leader or director needs to have certain insights. There's a balance between what I suppose, they can ask and find out and bring up in conversation, and maybe what their people are willing to offer. Is there a way that that can be somehow, I suppose, brought together, or is it just a case of being, you know, I suppose honesty and transparency on both sides, look, I'm not prying. This is why I'm asking kind of thing?

Zena Everett 13:45

Yeah, I think so. I mean, you know, this all has to be, your listeners will know better than anybody, this has to be navigated terribly sensitively. But there's nothing wrong with saying, you know, I've noticed you haven't done your task this week. Can we have a chat about it? You know? I've noticed is a really nice way to start this and and your community will know that, what was the fact like 48 or the stat that 48% of managers don't like giving, you know, having what's called a difficult conversation, you know, which is that kind of feedback, which is 100% their responsibility to give feedback like that is their job, so that people can make incremental progress towards their goals and feel motivated. So I think there's an element of that. And certainly if you've got somebody you know, a colleague who's never appeared bothered before, or a manager who's never appeared bothered trying to have a chat with you and pry. Then, of course, that's not right, because it will come over as books ticking but, but you know, managers should be interested in in that whole person, the the person, not just the the number on the spreadsheet, and should be able to. Say, You know what they've noticed and what's going on, and it take you, you know, it's all about trust, isn't it takes a while to build trust. What's that expression? "trust strolls in and it leaves on horseback or something?" I think I'm mixing the metaphor here, but it's, it's something like that. It takes a while. Yeah. So, so I think lot of this is just having, you know, able to have good conversations and just be sensitive to what they're telling you and what they're not telling you, and just, you know how they come across and saying, you know you didn't have your camera on today, Mervyn, when we had our chat is, you know, you know, when we had that team meeting, that's not like you Is everything okay? And they might say, Yeah, it's fine, even if it isn't, but they appreciate being asked and and then they're more likely to come to you, at least they're bothered.

Mervyn Dinnen 15:47

And so with we're talking, I suppose, a lot about kind of managers and leaders and their direct relationships with the people in their teams, human resources, HR, people sometimes sit obviously outside of that. So how can they get involved? I mean it presumably, if there's a manager or leader who wants to speak to HR and say, Look, I'm having problem with my team, can you help me or something? But most autocratic style managers and leaders wouldn't own up to that. So what? What if, I suppose, what is HR entry point to to, I suppose, understanding potential issues like that before they're really flagged up, it kind of creating, I suppose, the harmonious environment.

Zena Everett 16:37

Wow. I mean, I'd love, I'd love to hear from your listeners what they're doing and what works for them. My first thought, and I heard you say that is, I think when somebody comes with a problem, my team aren't doing this, is to say, Well, what's behind that? And to, you know, to use their coaching skills on on the manager, to try and get the manager to figure out their role, because it will be about the manager will 100% be, and I've got a couple of case studies in the books when teams are underperforming. I mean something I do a lot of workshops on at the moment to teams that aren't taking accountability. And then when I say to the team, what are you accountable for? They don't know. When I say to them, you know, accountability is not just doing your task. It's what looking down the line and thinking, actually, how does this fit in? How can I do it better? You know, all those kinds of questions. They say, Well, I don't know how it fits in. It's never been explained so it, you know, it goes back to basics, doesn't it? If managers really do their job properly, understand the purpose behind it, fire people up, explain the boundaries, explain the ground rules, and then ask questions, inquiry driven leadership, and then there's a lot less poor communication. You know, it's all poor behavior.

Mervyn Dinnen 18:02

You use an expression: inquiry driven leadership; Is that something that comes naturally to people, or is it a again, is this a skill that's learned?

Zena Everett 18:11

I think, in a crazy busy world, we are used to someone coming to us and we give them a very quick solution. We're not so good at asking the questions, which is all it is inquiry driven leadership is asking questions in a kind of coaching style when appropriate. So my kind of bug barrier is getting managers to be crystal clear on expectations, boundaries, vision. This is what I expect for you; this is what we're here for; this is what we stand for as a team. They have to do all that. But then once they've done that, and they've got people who are performing well and know their jobs, then it's their job to ask questions, to get them doing even better. And to use the word autocratic, you know, that's just so old school, so old school, whereas they, you know, those managers don't hear bad news, do they? They don't get critical information. They don't get feedback because they're not asking for it. Like if I wanted your opinion, I'd ask for it. That's the kind of attitude which is just, you know, it doesn't work. You've gotta have everybody in your team looking at opportunities now, haven't you, and solving problems and thinking for themselves and looking at what's around the corner. You can't do it all yourself anymore. So so, you know, this is where human resources have to really train and coach. So I think, I mean, this might be a little bit simplistic, but I think when managers come to them with a problem, they need to work with that manager in a parallel process of how they want the manager to behave, not rush to solve it. Just say, "What do you think's going on? Why is that going on? What's going on? Have you asked them?" Because they won't know, you know, I used to get requests for coaching, you know, make them more confident. You say, Well, what does that actually mean? You know, what does that mean? But be more confident. You. Like, what now, is that what you're saying.

Mervyn Dinnen 20:09

In your book, Badly Behaved People, you say that each chapter is a true story from your, I suppose, coaching practice so these you're not just, I suppose writing about potential problems, you are writing about real life, real world issues and problems that people have had in the world of work that you have helped to to sort out. Without wishing to ask you to go through them all, I mean, there are a couple, sorry, are there a couple of examples that you would pull out now to just say, Look, this is something that was causing great problems, and yet, you know, it was quite simple to fix, and I'm guessing a lot of things just by open conversation. But is there anything else?

Zena Everett 20:52

Yeah. I mean, look, as you know, the job of a coach is usually just to help somebody see their blind spots. So, there was quite a lot of that. And my favorite one was the grumpy guy who would lose his temper in the office every so often, have an explosion, and his team really liked him. He was it was a him. His team really liked him, but they were losing respect for him. Now, he was he wasn't cross with them. He would just be crossed because the system didn't work, or a customer didn't pay, or something like that. He wasn't aggressive with his team. He wasn't rude to his team. He wasn't sweary with his team. That would be an entirely different kettle of fish, and there's nothing like a middle-aged woman like me to put a bloke like that right. So, in this case, he was a really lovely man; but, he just had these kind of explosions. And ,his team had said to me, "this is starting to be a problem." And his HR had said, "this is going to be a real problem for him. You know, we need to talk about his temper. We need to talk about Kevin's temper." And I said to Kevin, "you've got daughters in the workplace, haven't you?" He said, "yep." I said, "Well, how would you feel if somebody did that in front of them?"And he said, "I would be not happy." Right? Okay. And you know, at that moment, that literally, was a blind spot for him. And he thought, oh my god, I had no idea. You know, sometimes I could be moody in the morning. Sometimes we don't realize how contagious our behavior is and the impact we have on other people. I think that's quite a big lesson to learn, isn't it? We know about mood contagion, but particularly for people in an authoritative role, we don't realize the impact we have on other people. You know, we're so wrapped up in our own stuff,

Mervyn Dinnen 22:46

And that's down, I suppose, a lot to self awareness?

Zena Everett 22:50

Yeah, and you know, even, actually, you know, you do virtual sessions like I do, you know who, even when you have somebody on the screen who's kind of nodding and smiling, and, you know, you can see that they're actually interacting, even if you don't know if they're actually nodding and smiling about you, they could be listening to something on the radio behind you or something. But, you know, even those people have a big impact on the energy on a screen, whereas, equally, somebody who's got who's looking down or, you know, not engaging, can, even then, can set the energy virtually, like, it's extraordinary. So, I think so those are the kinds of things I think just actually, you know, like, I say they're not, they weren't well, they were badly behaved. But it was from a, often, from quite a good place, a naive place. They just needed to have their behavior explained. My also, my favorite was a frenemy, which was somebody who was working with her boss. And then her boss actually, these sound quite gender specific, and in fact, they shouldn't be that. So they're not meant to be at all. But her boss was great to her, and it was all lovely until she started to out-perform her boss. And then, you know, that all got a bit nasty, but that was actually from her manager's vulnerability, which was dealt with rather than nastiness or vindictiveness. So there's a whole, there's a whole mess of fabulous problems that we've all had. And I've put in ones I haven't put in all the horror stories, because they were, you know, extraordinary. These are kind of almost the day to day stuff, the lazy colleague, the person that's not picking up the slack, the mood Hoovers, the negative people, the "Oh, it's never going to change. Nothing's going to work," you know, all that kind of stuff. So there's so I try to put all people in there. It's fun. It's great fun doing it.

Mervyn Dinnen 24:48

I'm sure, I'm sure. And all human life is there. We're coming, I suppose, toward the end of the conversation, although I'm sure there's lots more we could discuss. So, in terms of, you know, I've asked you a couple of times about, you know, the HR, HR people within the business, what their role would be, in terms of, I suppose, if you're advising somebody, maybe, who was kind of, maybe somebody came to you, who's an HR, an experienced HR person, HR manager, who's joining a new organization, different kind of sector and stuff. What kind of advice would you give them in terms of, I suppose you know, having building that trust, building that knowledge of the people around them?

Zena Everett 25:39

Well, of course, I've never given advice because I'm a coach on time, but I would say,

Mervyn Dinnen 25:43

help them, aid them.

Zena Everett 25:46

Yeah, I think, Okay, three things: First thing is allow pockets of time to really listen and find out what the issue is. We all know it's never the it, there's never it's never the obvious thing that people talk about. It's the one that they talk about 20 minutes later. So it's better to have a slightly longer, longer conversation and get there than than rush. So slow down. Slow things down. I'd secondly say, be clear on the boundaries. So, they also need to know, really, what are they accountable for, where their responsibility starts and stops, what other people expect from them and so on. Be super clear on that. And then I think the third thing is to think hard about their brand, actually, how they want to be remembered in the organization. Are they a game, you know, a policeman? Are they, you know? Are they a counselor? Are they, you know, they want a seat at the table, so they need to think as well about actually, have they got something valuable to say, and is that coming across? My favorite feedback exercise is to say, right, when you think about this person, what are the three words that come to mind, and then you get all sorts of things. So that's, you know, so that is, I'd say that's what they should do. And I've, you know, be really intentional about their conversations. And right when I when this person is feeding back on me to somebody else, what is it I want them to say about me? Does that answer your question? It answers somebody's question. Might not be that one.

Mervyn Dinnen 27:25

It does. It does. I suppose that the the one thing I need to ask before we wrap up, particularly, you know, we're having this conversation in the UK a few days after, there seems to have been a raft of news and debate on TV and in the media about remote, flexible, hybrid, asynchronous, working with yet more CEOs coming out saying everybody needs to go back to the office. And, you know, others saying, No, everybody needs to be at home. And there's been documentaries on it, and what, or I suppose, how, how how has the growth, and I have already had two or three podcast conversations over the last year with people about this, the growth of remote, flexible, hybrid, asynchronous working: How has that, I suppose, impacted a lot of the work you do in terms of, you've got different personalities, you've got complex interpersonal relationships amongst teams. But then you add in the fact that they are rarely in the same space together?

Zena Everett 28:28

Yeah, yeah. Look, it's had a really huge impact. And, I think we're only just seeing it, and some managers are really, really good at doing all the things that we've talked about. You know, still maintaining a culture, having clear vision, having clear standards, boundaries and amazing communication, but they've had to shift themselves out of the weed, out of the weeds, into what the opposite is. I'm not even going to say helicopter, because that's such a cliche, but to make sure that they're doing that and they're not bogged down in their own tasks, you know, with their head down. So I think, I think it has had a massive impact, and there is more bad behavior, and on the level that I see, I get brought in on accountability, like I said, because I think people are saying everyone's just getting on with their tasks, but they're not joining the dots. They're building silos. They're not working across teams. They're not talking to each other. They don't see where it fits in. And I think that is one of the issues. And of course, you can get around all this with great leadership and being mindful of it, but I think those are the issues that that we are seeing from, from any kind of remote teamwork, but there are plenty of people that are solving those problems, but it takes a lot of work. And nobody, I mean, have you ever done a survey in an organization and people said, Yeah, communication is great, you know. And I do think so, final thing, I think there's often a, you know, a real kind of credibility gap between what organizations say on their values, on their website, and actually how you know these accidental managers who aren't trained, these managers are keeping their teams together. So it's it's task focused, it's not join the dots. And people are fed up. People are bored, seriously bored. That's what my crazy busy thing is. Like they're just they're doing Ultra processed work, you know, layers of shuffling, not doing their jobs because they don't kind of see where they fit in.

Mervyn Dinnen 30:37

As as ever, it's been an absolute pleasure to talk to you. Your first book was called "The Crazy Busy Cure "

Zena Everett 30:48

My second [book] actually! I never talk about that. I did write a career book called "Mind Flip: Take the Fear out of Your Career."

Mervyn Dinnen 30:53

Oh, you did. You did!

Zena Everett 30:55

I did. But, because I don't do workshops so much on that, I just, I don't talk about it. I'm the worst at self-publicity.

Mervyn Dinnen 31:06

Your second book was called "The Crazy Busy Cure" and your third book is called "Badly Behaved People", which has just been published, and people will be able to access online. I don't know if it's just published in the UK, or is this worldwide?

Zena Everett 31:23

No, it's, I think it's in bookshops in the US in the summer, but it's definitely available on Amazon now in the US.

Mervyn Dinnen 31:31

Um, Zena, it's been an absolute pleasure to talk to you, and thank you very much for your time.

Zena Everett 31:41

And can I say, if anybody has got any brilliant bad stories of bad behavior and wants to rant about them, please get in touch.

Mervyn Dinnen 31:49

How can people contact you?

Zena Everett 31:54

Zena@zenaeverett.com

Mervyn Dinnen 31:57

okay, if you've got badly behaved people in your organization, that you don't know what to do with, you now know who to contact. Who you going to call? Zena. Thank you.

Zena Everett 32:09

Thank you.

Transcribed by https://otter.ai