

TCM 120 - Farah Harris: Leadership Tools for Non-Toxic Hybrid Workspaces

Mitch Simon: Welcome to another episode of Team Anywhere, where CEOs, leaders and experts at building teams,

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: companies,

Mitch Simon: organizations,

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: and amazing cultures, share how to lead from anywhere in the world. I'm your co-host on the East Coast, Ginny Bianco-Mathis.

Mitch Simon: And I'm your co-host on the West Coast, Mitch Simon, and we invite you to join us to Team Anywhere.

Hello, and welcome to another episode of Team Anywhere. I'm your cohost on the West Coast Mitch Simon, and on the East coast we have our fabulous cohost, Doctor Virginia Bianco-Mathis.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Ginny, how are you today? I tell you, every time you say that, it just makes me smile and puts me in a wonderful mood. I should just record that and play it to myself every morning. We can definitely arrange that.

Mitch Simon: And we have in the studio today an amazing guest. Can you introduce our guest, Ginny?

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: I certainly can. I am introducing Farah Harris and Farah's, founder and CEO of Working Well Daily. She is a consultant, speaker, coach, and psychotherapist whose goal is to disrupt toxic workplaces. Yay. And help create wellbeing and belonging in organization. She has an upcoming book, *The Color of Emotional Intelligence*. Sounds exciting. Welcome.

Farah Harris: Thank you. So happy to be here.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Good. Let's start with an easy question. How about that? Okay, sure. What has surprised you the most over the last two years?

Farah Harris: I don't know if it's a surprise or if it's a disappointment. What COVID has brought has been like the worst group project ever, and we seem to be failing at this project over and over again. I knew that here in the United States that this was a I would say that, you know, we're very much a individualistic country, but it has now been to like our peril.

And so, it has been sad to see that we haven't been able to really rally together to work on showing up for one another. So it was a bit of a surprise, but kind of like, not really, this is just more of sad.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Okay. All right. Well, let's get into some more things and see what kinds of wonderful work you're doing to put that on a more of a positive note.

Farah Harris: Yes.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: And so, let's talk about the things that you are involved in, and one is something called the toxic workplace. And so what happens to teams and what kind of behaviors are prevalent in a toxic workplace and what would it look like if we were finally gonna say, working well daily.

Farah Harris: Yeah. So, toxic workplaces can look different. So what we typically think of when we hear of the word toxic workplaces, *it's an environment that I would say even in both instances are environments that have some type of adverse health effect towards the employees. So this could be through harassment, violence, I mean, I can go on and on—*

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: all the things we see when we walk in the hallway, right?

Farah Harris: Pretty much, pretty much. *But another thing that I don't think people realize is that you can be in a toxic work environment and actually enjoy the people that you work with, it's not necessarily the environment or the people. It could actually be that you are not feeling challenged, you are getting bored at your job.* And I have my own personal story. You know, in my first bout into the corporate space, I loved my senior leaders. I've really enjoyed the people that I worked with, but there wasn't any clarity into what the career path would be for me.

And I found myself finding reasons not to show up to work. I was recognized I was getting, you know, symptoms of depression and frustration and so it's not

always a bad boss. You know, sometimes the job is bad because it's just not meeting you where you are in whatever season you're in, in your life.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Oh. That is so true. And I'm glad you're making that distinction. So once I get that cloud over my head, I begin to look for, right? More and more of why this place is no good.

Farah Harris: Yes.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Now what does working well look like?

Farah Harris: Yeah, so, none of the things I just mentioned.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Just erase them.

Farah Harris: You know, just erase them. You're in an environment that you wanna thrive in because everyone is, practicing what I love talking about, which is emotional intelligence. So they are self aware, they're socially aware, they're culturally aware, it's where you're not getting bored, right? There's clarity in terms of your career path and the development that's being invested in you as an employee.

It's a place where you know that there's clear and effective communication, especially from leadership. That there is I like to use the term *work life alignment*, not work-life balance, 'cause that's a bit of a myth but your work and your life are aligned and your senior leaders are modeling.

Taking care of themselves. *It's a place where you feel like you belong.* You have that sense of belonging. You feel you are respected and you are able to contribute and challenge and learn. That's a working well daily workplace.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Okay. And you mentioned a few where the leaders are role modeling the kind of alignment, again, I like that distinction, alignment versus work balance. We keep striving for work balance. That there is some good communication around the vision. What other tools and or techniques do you come in and help an organization with, can you give some of those examples?

Farah Harris: Yeah. So. I like to say that we're all leaders regardless of title but to my people leaders you know, the ones that actually have direct reports, it's so important to be clear and concise with your communication, especially during these last few years where there's so much uncertainty, right?

We don't know, are we in the office? Are we not in the office? Are we staying hybrid? Are we not staying hybrid? I remember even in the early days of the pandemic when people weren't sure when they were coming back in and when were they going to get that communication. And leaders, you know, we don't like to look like we don't know what we're doing.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yes.

Farah Harris: So, you know, being able to *elevate your own emotional intelligence and practice that awareness*, like I don't feel comfortable. Not knowing, but being able to regulate your emotions and recognize the importance of just even saying that like, hey, I'm not sure when we're gonna come back in the office, but we're going to make sure that we give you ample time because we understand that there's families who may have children who are at home, and you know, as you're trying to figure out how to readjust your life, you're not gonna get this memo on Friday night saying Monday, come into the office.

You know, so *it's very important for leaders to make sure that they like to lower the threat threshold, you know, meaning that you're wanting to decrease any sense of uncertainty or confusion or angst that your team members may be having*. And, you know, practicing that empathy, like, what could you know, Ginny be thinking, you know what, what could she be feeling in this moment?

And do I have a response? A way to kind of bring that down. Because if we have a team that's full of uncertainty, most likely they're going to have some distrust. They're going to go into survival mode, which we don't want our team members to do, 'cause everyone goes into survival mode differently. Some people become reclused, some become defensive and aggressive.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yeah.

Farah Harris: And when you're seeing that show up in your team members, you have to be curious and ask yourself, why? What is showing up that's making them not feel safe? *So leaders that are clear in their communication, empathetic in their communication really can help decrease environments where that uncertainty has an opportunity to brew and create more of a hostile environment than necessary*.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: And because you're also a psychotherapist, you and I both know and Mitch around, telling people this is one thing, having to move towards that behavior is another. So you come in, you're talking to a group of

leaders that are saying, we have some of these issues, how do you help them change that actual behavior? What kind of tools and techniques do you use?

Farah Harris: Yeah, so I recall there was one gentleman we were talking about. Not necessarily the uncertainty, but the belonging piece that we're hearing about at the workplace. You know, how we're embedding D & I. And it was so funny 'cause he's like, we order from Costco, you know some treats and you know, I have this person, go get it.

And I'm like, how are you defining belonging? You know, because if you're thinking that it just means we're coming together, then we haven't taken the time to really understand what we're trying to create. And so with leaders, I say, okay, how are we defining it? But not just that, taking a moment to go, how do you experience it yourself?

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yes.

Farah Harris: And then, as a clinician, I'm about the feeling words, right? *And we always feel like we leave emotions out the door, but everything we do is based off of some kind of feeling. So really working with leaders to have them tap into, well, how does belonging make you feel? When you hear the word, what does that come up? You know, what emotions come up and to ask for feedback.*

Well we have our annuals or our quarterly feedback should be embedded into the culture of the organization. So, I tell leaders, hey, here's how you can have feedback consistently. When you brought this up, I thought that was a great addition to what we were talking about. Because what you wanna do is encourage the good behavior or the good actions from your team members, and then have them, you know, continue that. But they're not going to do it if they're not aware, right?

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: No.

Farah Harris: So, no, we wanna make that clear. And then if there's something that seems like a growth edge. I noticed here that you missed this part, you know, on page five, and it seems to be a part of the project that you might need some assistance with. I'm going to see if we can get Ginny on. Are you on board with that? So, it's not until December or whenever you do your annual reviews where you're letting them know, hey, you're great here, but here are your weaknesses.

And you're like, I never knew.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Yes.

Farah Harris: So making it not so formal, is really what I try to help leaders understand. Like we can have just day to day conversations where in real time we're providing feedback to our employees. So, it becomes so conversational that they're not thinking that they're being penalized.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: I love that.

Farah Harris: You know?

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: It's part of working daily the healthy way. I love the term you use Growth Edge, right? Having leaders notice the growth edge. The growth edge, right?

Mitch Simon: A question about belonging because it's so important right now. And you said, how do you experience it yourself? And a lot of people right now are, you know, still in this world where they're still feeling a little bit separated from others. You know, some people have like dived in, like, oh yeah, I'm gonna be with my family. I'm gonna hug 'em all day long, and I really feel like belong. I'm just wondering what you're seeing really from a virtual environment?

Farah Harris: That's a great question. I'm seeing this question being brought up often, especially when people go, I don't know. I feel like I am disconnected from my colleagues. I'm not sure. And can we really even create connection and belonging in a virtual space? And I bring up, and I may be dating myself, but do you remember pen pals?

Mitch Simon: Yes I do.

Farah Harris: Okay. You didn't see this person. You may or may not have been able to get them on the phone, but you were intentional on writing to them and they were intentional on writing back to you and you created this connection. *So, the whole thing of belonging is not something that you just feel, it is something that you intentionally have to do.* So, if you have team members who are not coming in person, how are you intentionally sending an email, getting on a call, doing a virtual conversation. Are you only reaching out to this team member and talking just about work, or are you asking other things related

to who they are? You know, some basic question like, oh, I didn't even know you were into documentaries.

What kind of documentaries are you into? And then you find that you have some commonalities and some, you know, similar interests, but I've been able to create relationships with people I've never met yet in real time. And my husband's always fascinated. My kids know who they are. He's just, they're like, is that Miss Sarah?

Is that miss such and such? 'Cause we're sending WhatsApp notes to each other. But it's an intentional decision that I am making to foster a relationship where I want to see some type of return on investment. And so as a leader, as a colleague, we need to do that. And we have to remember, there are certain companies that have been remote for years and they've always had people who weren't at a centralized place and have thrived and have done well.

I think the thing is that we are not used to or comfortable with the change, and the minute we see the change, we take it as a loss. I think you had, you know, Sarah Noll Wilson on here, and I love her statement that people don't fear change. They fear loss, and people are like, oh, I'm losing the connection.

Okay, you may have lost one type of connection, but you didn't necessarily try to see if there's another way that you can connect, and it can still be very deep and very beautiful and create a sense of belonging, whether it is in person or on a virtual space.

Mitch Simon: I love that you talked about, intentionality because belonging is something that just doesn't stop and end. Belonging is something where there are actions that are being taken consistently over time.

So, you know, how do you feel like you belong in your family as well? I know I belong in my family because my family invites me over every week. Right. So now I know. Cause could you say like, you know, when's the last time you got together with your family? Oh, that was 10 years ago. Well, do you feel like I belong? There's no way. Cause you haven't been with them.

Farah Harris: But I would even challenge that because there's something that happens depending on the connection. I have a best friend, you know, a childhood friend who I don't see often. We don't always get on the phone, but when we do call each other, it's like this three hour marathon.

It's like never stopped and it's instantaneous. But we have this unique connection that somebody else that I'm friends with, I have to actually talk to them frequently to keep that, you know, homeostasis or that baseline of our relationship going. I think about my own family where I would think that my parents would say that they have a good relationship and a close relationship with their children.

And I would think me and my brother and sister would say the same thing, but I really only talk to my mom once a week. Like we set it up since college, like every Sunday at like five thirty, six o'clock, expect a call and it's this continuous intentional time. But I really could call my mom every day and love it.

But we don't always talk all the time. But I know without a shadow of the doubt that there's like this innate understanding that we have a deeper relationship. So it's not always necessarily the frequency. It's again, more the intentionality of the time that you're spending—

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: *and the quality—*

Farah Harris: and the quality—

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: And you are of the mind to be conscious of that. This person needs more touching than that person. This person I had 10 years working with, but now we don't see each other maybe once every two years, but it doesn't matter because we've established that deep relationship.

Farah Harris: Yes.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: And you're mindful about that and you act upon it. Now with what happened with COVID and hybrid and virtual. As you said, we feel discomfort with the change—

Farah Harris: a hundred percent

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: and if you put some thought into it, you can create connections that are equally deep. And I think that there's some people they don't wanna admit that.

Farah Harris: Because it would just be easier to do what we normally did, you know?

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Totally.

Farah Harris: And now we're in this new normal and it's like, oh, no I don't wanna do this.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: And we'll get onto another topic, but there have been some articles very recently, over the past two days with some new statistics that have come out because of what's happening in the economy.

Now people are saying, well, really what's more important to me now is just having a job, and I'm not even gonna worry about hybrid, virtual, or going in the office. So now belonging means I have a job, right? So it's gonna change and shift. What are you doing to control your own space to have those connections?

So lemme ask you, you said in one of your blogs that we have to stop making employees responsible for emotional incompetent bosses.

Farah Harris: Yes.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: What do you mean by that?

Farah Harris: We have people who have been elevated to leadership roles. Not necessarily because they are good people managers, but because of performance and productivity or whatever. And there's not enough assessment and accountability for some of those individuals who are showing up and pretty much are bad actors.

Ways about them that are causing harm, whether they are bullying, they're harassing, you know, they're discriminating all that. But yet there's all these articles that I was reading during the time that I wrote my little thought piece, where they were saying, you know, here are the tools that you can do when you have a bad boss.

And I'm like, why are we encouraging people to stay in places where they are being harmed? It's like as if it's an article for a person that's being abused by their domestic partner and going like, here's how to handle, you know, that black eye.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Oh my gosh, what an analogy.

Farah Harris: You know, it's like, why would we do that? We would never do that. And so, there's some gas lighting that happens like, oh, well, you know, that's just Tim, you know, that's just Mary. I have a colleague of mine who

unfortunately is currently in a situation where she has a bad boss that's inept and not equipped to really do what she's supposed to do.

You know, she's like, I know more than she does, and she belittles or she talks over me and I've gone to HR multiple times and they're like, we're aware, but we can't do anything about that.

Which then it's like, what are we communicating to our employees when we say we want you to show up well? But we're not going to hold your leaders accountable. We want you to show up and have the emotional intelligence. We want you to do your job and be of excellence, and we're just going to enable this other person that's here, whether it's because of nepotism whether it's because they are a high performer and they bring in, you know, the big accounts, right?

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: They bring in the money.

Farah Harris: They bring in the money. And yet, you know, we wonder why there's you know, high attrition and we're looking at people who are, you know, struggling, you know, with their presenteeism. So I'm gonna show up, but I'm only gonna show up halfway.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Right.

Farah Harris: Or they're finding excuses to not come to work because of, you know, the impact on their own mental health.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: I get that a lot, obviously, right? Mitch you go into these organizations. What if you're trying to do all these good things and yet there are these other incompetence. And, the articles that say, here's what you can do to manage around such people, I think are useful to a point.

Manage around those people while you then figure out what you are gonna do yourself of just staying, going, or squeezing everything out of that place until you can jump ship.

Farah Harris: A hundred percent agree.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: So now this might be aligned with that. A lot of this stuff around quiet quitting. And you also wrote a lovely, piece on why we might be using that term incorrectly. I loved your perspective. Can you share that?

Farah Harris: Thank you. Yeah, I feel that you are in the space with me, so we're always paying attention to like the new trending topics and it always seems like there's some new popular word, popular trend and quiet quitting is the new one. I'm already tired of it.

I wish we'd be quiet about quiet, quitting.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Agree agree.

Farah Harris: But I feel like most of these terms are very similar to what we were just talking about in terms of, you know, we are not examining the workplace. We're like really examining the worker and not taking enough time to go wait, but why would someone want to quiet quit?

And what does it look like exactly? And I even asked in that piece like, is quiet quitting, equitable? Like, are there certain places where, due to them having some type of marginalization feel like they have to do twice as much than their other colleagues. So there's no way that they're quiet quitting.

They're making sure that they're loud and seen, you know? And then is quiet quitting, truly someone being incompetent or lazy in their job, or are they actually doing everything that they signed up for what was on the contract and they're just not going above and beyond because they have their own sense of boundaries and work life alignment?

And then even as a leader, are we asking leaders, are you aware if somebody in your team is quiet, quitting? Depending on how you're defining it, you know, are they becoming less verbal in a meeting? You know, are they not asking to be on certain projects? Are you seeing their mood shift a little? 'cause maybe it's not necessarily the work related.

Maybe their family's going through a crisis like this is again, that whole feedback and constant intentional communication as a leader is for you to know what's going on with your team members. And so, I just think it's laughable that we've come up with this term for people who are doing their job and probably love their job.

Like you said, I just want a job. I need to pay my bills and this job does it and I'm good at it and I don't necessarily want anything more or less from it, and I'm completely content. And why should they be penalized or questioned in all these thought pieces around it? I think it's silly.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: I like that when you said, you know, it depends on the person and the circumstances. And they could be perfectly happy.

Farah Harris: Perfectly happy—

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: and still be contributing in a way that's good for the organization.

Farah Harris: Yes.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: But you mentioned a word that I'd like to pick up on, about boundaries. How do boundaries work in this whole thing with hybrid virtual leaders, teams?

Farah Harris: Yeah, I love boundaries, they're like the best self care tool in your self care toolbox. I mean, because they're guardrails. They let you know how to keep the good in and the bad out. But they're there also to help guide your relationships and your tasks? Like, what do you want to do? What do you not want to do? How do you relate to your colleagues? How do you not relate to your colleagues?

During the last couple years we've struggled to have healthy boundaries, especially around like, work hours. I think I was reading an article that, you know, if on average in the United States it was a 41-ish hours per week.

It's now three additional hours per day is what they're finding because people didn't know how to turn off work. You know, their laptop is right there, so I might as well go ahead and do this. You know, oh, well it's the morning, the kids aren't up yet. Let me check this email. And that became a problem.

And it's still a problem for many. And so we have to be careful. My concern was that, you know, when we were trying to figure out when are we all coming back to the office, I was like, you're gonna have a burnt out community of people before you even have them re-enter the physical workplace because people didn't know when to stop.

And we are still struggling with that. But it's also like, are you communicating with people during their vacation? I think of one team lead that I worked with when we were actually doing a self care retreat. And I was, you know, like let's grow in our awareness as leaders. Let's learn how to use self care.

And of course, you know, they're just like, this is so practical. I don't know why we don't consistently do it. And it's like, well kind of to relearn it over and over again 'cause circumstances happen. But she shared how she had the flu and also had had a root canal and jumped on a meeting call, could not talk cause you know, her mouth was [inaudible] and, and cotton and everything.

And her boss was like, why are you here?

Mitch Simon: Why are you here?

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: There you go.

Farah Harris: Like, you can't contribute. And she felt such a moment of conviction because she was an amazing leader and she knew that she was trying to model good leadership. And though her words were to her team, take care of yourself, have boundaries, you know, practice self care.

She's like, here I was showing up when I really shouldn't have, I should have been taking care of myself. And they were honest with her. They're like, well, if you were on a call with the flu after a root canal, then do I really have permission to say no to certain things. Or do I have to show up myself?

Because if you are this amazing leader that I respect, I'm gonna follow you more than just what you tell me. I'm going to follow what I'm seeing. And she was like, oh my gosh, I need to do better. You know, and I have to ask myself, how am I truly showing up? 'cause it's not just the words that my team is listening to me say. It's not just do as I say, not as I do. But she's like, no, I want you to do as I do as well. And so she was like what is this? She was like, it was a moment of craziness.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: And of course the things you're saying, be more mindful. This constant feedback that is just so important in making it part of a culture and organization. The role modeling, these are the things all leaders should have been doing. The better leaders, the ones that are in that head space are learning those skills, are putting in some behavior modification techniques with the help with people like you to get better and better. And I think we're also helping some folks on the fence.

Farah Harris: Yes.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: I don't know if we're reaching those toxic people.

Farah Harris: You know? And we have to make sure that we use our energy wisely.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Well, tell us about your upcoming book, *The Color of Emotional Intelligence*.

Yes, yes, I'm excited. You know, the book will come out in 2023 and *The Color of Emotional Intelligence* really speaks to the impact of inequity on this, what I call strength, skill. It's not a soft skill 'cause it takes a lot of strength to be a master of yourself and your emotions. And it's written in three parts.

Farah Harris: And so, for someone who has no clue what emotional intelligence is, I introduce emotional intelligence or EQ as we can also call it. I call it in black and white. And then the second part is where we talk about how inequity plays a role. So, all types of inequity, whether it is, you know, your race, your gender, disability, et cetera and how those of us who have been historically or systemically marginalized, use our emotional intelligence differently as more of a skillset for survival and not necessarily one that we practice, you know, for healthy relationships personally or for our self care.

And then the last part of the book I'm excited about is, how we all, like every single one of us can use our emotional intelligence to create environments of belonging and psychological safety so that there aren't members of our society that need to mask or hide themselves.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Right. That's wonderful. Well, that's an exciting book to look forward to.

Mitch Simon: I'm really interested in your book 'cause I do think it connects back to just the opening when we asked, you know, how's it been for the last two years? and we were very surprised and we weren't surprised.

I think we were saddened.

Farah Harris: Yeah.

Mitch Simon: Because we weren't surprised with the way people treated slash ignored slash took advantage of the situation over the last two years. So, I do wanna encourage everyone to go out there and pick up your book. Your book is coming out in 2023.

Farah Harris: Yes.

Mitch Simon: Where can we find you?

Farah Harris: I am on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram, all at the same handle @Farahharrislpc. And if you wanna know more about my work and what I do, You can visit *workingwelldaily.com*. And if you're interested on getting behind the scenes as I'm getting this book to launch and get into your hands, you can sign up by going to *workingwelldaily.com/books*.

Mitch Simon: Great. Well, thank you Farah. Thank you, Ginny. Thank you to all of our listeners out there. And if you've loved this episode, which we have, please share this with your friends, your colleagues, your family. And we look forward to seeing you next time on our next episode of Team Anywhere.