

13. Leading with Empathy with Melissa Cohen

Michelle: [00:00:00] From Bosstrack, it's her HypeSquad, a show about amazing women who've made incredible strides as leaders in their industry. They're here to support you and your leadership growth to encourage you and hype you up as part of your HypeSquad.

Hello and welcome back to another episode of Her HypeSquad with Bosstrack. I'm your host, Michelle Harris. In this episode, I have a wide ranging conversation about leading with empathy with Melissa Cohen, a fashion industry executive. She offers some great advice and insight you don't wanna miss.

Melissa and I talk about what empathy looks like, how to develop empathy, and why it's so important to have empathy as a leader today. And of course we talk about Brené Brown because who can have a [00:01:00] conversation about empathy without talking about her. But before I jump into the conversation, I'd like to give you a little bio on Melissa.

Melissa Cohen is a fashion industry executive who has led teams at well known American brands, including Ralph Lauren, Tommy Hilfiger, and Nautica. She has led product development, sourcing, and production across various categories for men's, women's, and children's apparel. In 2020, Melissa launched her own consulting business, providing her expertise to startup and growth stage brands, passionate about girls and women's empowerment.

She is founding member of chief and is deeply involved in Her Move Next, a nonprofit dedicated to empowering women and young girls through chess community and competition. In her free time, Melissa enjoys reading Broadway musicals, watching sports and all things pumpkin spice. The. And a quick note on the audio of this episode.

I was in the process of moving and didn't have internet yet, [00:02:00] so I'm on location outside and my audio is not the best. Melissa. Sounds great though. So, we chose not to do video to save on the bandwidth, so I apologize to anyone listening to this where we normally make video available. I know I say this about all my guests, but this conversation was so good.

I love talking about empathy. So let's jump into my conversation with Melissa Cohen, I'm so happy to have you on here, Melissa, I'm excited to talk to you about leading with empathy and we guess we can jump right into it. I, we gave the audience a little bit of a background on you, but I'd love for you to share who you are and what you do, what you've done with the audience, and so they can hear it directly from you.

Melissa: Yeah, sure. Thanks so much for having me. I'm really excited to be here as well. So I'm an executive in the fashion industry and I have several decades of experience in product [00:03:00] development and production and sourcing. Throughout my career, I've worked for major US brands like Ann Taylor Nautica, Tommy Hilfiger, Ralph Lauren but after the pandemic, pretty much completely upended the apparel industry along with many others.

In 2021, I launched my own consultancy, and so now I work with startup and growth stage brands, insourcing and product development. And in the past I've managed teams of up to 24 people, so I understand the complexities and the nuances of working in really different sized organizations, you know, from very small, all the way up through very large.

And as for what I do I feel like that could be a whole podcast in and of itself. But I like to give the cliff notes kind of version as that I help to take the design team's vision and turn it into reality. So once the design team creates what items are going to be offered in a brand line [00:04:00] for the season, my team and I find the manufacturers we source the materials, we negotiate, all of the prices we troubleshoot along the development and production processes.

Until the goods are made. And it's really very exciting and very rewarding to see those products later on in the store or online and know that, you know, you've had that history from day one of helping to bring that vision to life. And I really love what I do because it allows me to work cross-functionally with so many different teams within an organization.

So we work with design, with manufacturing, planning, sales, quality, assurance, logistics, you name it. If there's a team within the organization, there's a good chance we work with them in some capacity. And I can remember when I used to interview people and I would talk about what our team does. You know, it kind of always envisions ourselves as like, The center of the wheel and all those folks kind of going [00:05:00] out and connecting to the other teams within.

So I think it's a really exciting part of the industry. I know when people hear fashion, they think of all the glamor and the runway shows and you know, that's definitely part of it, but there's real people and real work that goes into making the clothes that we wear.

Michelle: Well, that's so interesting. So, so you've had leadership experience in industry before you started consulting practice, and then you are now in a somewhat different leadership role where you have your own team that you're leading, but you're also leading and connecting multiple teams at many different clients.

So the, I love that you get that really wide view of what works and some of the challenges that leaders face and you know, what's going on in the workplace today. . Can you share a little bit about your actual leadership experience before you started your practice and now, like what, what that looks like

Melissa: yeah, sure. So right [00:06:00] now in my consultant, say I'm a solopreneur, so I lead myself but different with different clients and different things. I do have people that report to me in different capacities. So I might work with a client and while I'm with that client, there's people that technically report into me, so I am still their leader.

And then there are other cases where I am just me and I'm working cross functionally, and that's where. You know, the experience that I've had in the past has really helped me because they're two very different sort of experiences, but you need to bring the same skills to those roles. And I know we're going to talk about empathy, so I don't want to talk about it too much until we get there, but that's really been one of the driving forces of how I view leadership.

I think it's, An important trait. I think it is finally getting some respect and it's getting some some press. It's kind of, a hot topic [00:07:00] now, but it never used to be that way. In fact, I think previously some might have viewed that as you're too soft or it's not actually a leadership trait, which would, with which I who disagree.

I think it's really important to, to be flexible as a leader. I think it's really important to be decisive and goal oriented. I think it's really important to know. What the company expects of you and your team and what everybody is marching towards, but always putting people first. I think, you know, we all throw around the, the term human resources and not always in a positive light, right?

Like everybody kind of dreads HR, oh no, I'm in trouble. But human resources are really a company's greatest asset and they are the company's greatest resources and I think it's really important to always know that and, and not lose sight of that.

Michelle: Yeah. That's so interesting that you bring that up because you're right.

I think human resources has definitely historically had [00:08:00] a bad wrap and definitely in my experience, , a very overworked team for the most part. So in your prior experience in industry, how large were the teams that you managed?

Melissa: Yeah, I would say the largest was 24.

Not all direct, obviously there were, there were layers, but the team as a whole that reported into me was 24. I had other teams that were smaller around 15. And then obviously, you know, in your first managerial roles, which I still view as leadership roles, you're still leading a team of people, even if you're.

At a, an executive level, you know, 3, 4, 5. So I've had teams of different sizes at different points in my career.

Michelle: Yeah. So you've had real, so, so you've had really direct one-on-one experience with, with people and which kind of goes into the discussion about, and we might as well jump right into excited to talk about this because it's not [00:09:00] something that we've really talked about on the podcast yet, and it is something with Bosstrack we, we focus heavily on because we do believe it's important and it's really the future of, of leadership and to be successful as a leader, it's no longer that direct aggressive, you do what I say approach.

You have to have the empathy to build the trust with your team and you know, get people to wanna, wanna work for you and, and not just wanna work for you, but, you know, go not, I hate to say go above and beyond because I know that's not, not looked upon favorably right now in social media, but but, you know, to, to get people to really give, give their all and, and be high performing.

But so not to take away from, you know, I'd love for to hear how you look at empathy and maybe what are some of the. Some of the things that you do specifically to approach your team with empathy?

Melissa: Yeah, sure. [00:10:00] So kind of like I said, I think empathy is finally getting its due. And when, when we used to talk about leadership and, you know, the whole conversation around superpowers and what's your superpower, I found that that conversation always kind of gravitated towards topics like power of influence, ambition, creativity decisiveness, and all of those are really great skills.

They're all important for leadership, but I, I truly, truly believe that leading from a place of empathy is really one of the greatest skills that a leader can aspire to attain. I think one positive thing that came out of the pandemic seems to be that there's a greater recognition of this. And when people were forced to work from home, possibly while they were caring for people who were sick or their kids were learning remotely, and everything just seemed to be one stressor after another.

I think that collectively we really learned [00:11:00] something that I know for me personally, I really first became aware the idea of empathy from Brene Brown. Anyone who's listening isn't familiar with her work. I'm just gonna give her a plug and see. Please check her out. She's yes, brilliant. In a very relatable way.

Right. And so one thing she made immediately clear from me personally is the difference between empathy and. And I think that's something that's lost on a lot of people, and it even was to me at first too. So being empathetic or having empathy, it's not feeling sorry for someone, it's not trying to change their feelings or how they react to something.

It's about really putting yourself in that person's shoes and meeting them where they are, and then making an effort to understand not only their feelings, but also their experiences, their life experiences, and how they got to where they are. And, and that really does take effort [00:12:00] sometimes. I think empathy, yes, some people are innately empathetic, but I think it's also something that we can learn and it's a practice that we can strengthen within ourselves.

And if anyone's listening and wants to understand empathy better, I'm going to, I'm gonna give Brene one last plug, and I swear I, I get nothing from this. But it'll literally take five minutes, Google. Brene Brown empathy video and watch it. It's about two or three minutes. But it was really, it was very meaningful to me.

It really shifted my understanding. And there's a line in that little short video that resonates with me today, and it's just, empathy is a choice and it's a vulnerable one. And I've always tried to remember that like, you can choose to

be empathetic. You can choose not to be empathetic, but why would you, why wouldn't you always choose the kindness and, and the understanding way to go?

Michelle: Yeah. Is that the Brene Brown, is that the little cartoon short that you're talking about? Okay.

Melissa: Exactly. It is a little cartoon. It's with a [00:13:00] little animal that like crawls down into a hole and another animal crawls down there with him, and there's a third animal who's not so empathetic and is more sympathetic and trying to make the, the, the animal who's.

Suffering feel better, but in all the wrong ways. . Yeah. And it, it just kinda shows really clearly what the difference is and, and how having empathy makes a difference and makes people feel seen and feel heard. And that's really important. Right. And, and there's a line and there also about empathy never starts with Well at least Yes.

Yes. Because that, that animal that's trying to make the other animal feel better for everything that is being said, you know, well, at least it's not such and such. At least it's not this. And you know that, that's not helpful. Sometimes we have that tendency to do it's try, you know, buck up. It's not that bad, but that's not what somebody who's struggling really wants to hear.

Michelle: Yeah. I love that you [00:14:00] brought that up. It's actually a video we share in our empathy course because I thought it was just so striking and such a great example for and, and short, and it gets all of it. In one, you know, two to three minute video. It's yeah, she's great. I love, love Brené Brown.

Melissa: Absolutely. I, I think that's so important, right? People want things that are in digestible formats. You know, there's, there's so much information out there, but when it becomes overwhelming, it's easy to just move on from it. And I mean, literally anybody can watch this video. It is, I sincerely believe it's about three minutes long, and I'm so excited that you, that you use it.

I think that's awesome.

Michelle: Yeah. No, go, go ahead. No,

Melissa: I was gonna say, you know, like in, in the workplace, in in leadership empathy can look, you know, like really different things. But you know, for me personally, it's really taking other perspectives into [00:15:00] consideration.

Showing compassion and making sure that. Pretty much everybody involved has a voice in the discussion.

And really important thing is not talking over people, not interrupting people when they're speaking. Because I can't tell you how many times I've been in a meeting and someone is speaking and I'm not going to lie. Many times it's a woman and someone starts speaking over them. And I'm also not gonna lie, cuz a lot of times it's a woman who's doing the interrupting too.

So I don't wanna just make this about, you know, men need to be more respectful. I see plenty of women doing that to other women as well. And to me that that's just one area where we can immediately. Do better. And we can show compassion because how many times are we in a meeting? Someone's talking, you're not really listening to what they're saying.

You're waiting for that opportunity to get your point across. And even if you're not [00:16:00] actively aggressively interrupting, you're not listening. And I think listening is one of the most important things that we can do in the workplace. And one of the most important things we can do from a, a point of, of compassion and empathy as well.

Michelle: That's so funny. When I was jumping in there, this is exactly what I was gonna talk about, is active listening, being such a critical component of empathy. Because in order to understand where someone's coming from, you do need to actually listen and hear them. And I, I just another, I guess throwing out another author or expert in the field would be Simon Sinek.

And just this morning, He had, he had a post on active listening. So that's, you know, he's definitely somewhat somebody to check out in this space as well. And I love, it's so interesting what you say about, you know, women being mostly, most, most of the time it's a woman being talked over, but it, it can be a woman or a man talking over [00:17:00] them.

And I, it's so interesting that dynamic because what is it about men speaking that warrants not being interrupted by female or male and then a woman, , it's an interesting thing. Not something we're gonna solve here, but sad.

Melissa: It's, it's an interesting dynamic and yeah, I don't really have an exact answer for it.

I just think as women, we need to do better, right? We shouldn't be interrupting anyone, male or female. But for sure we need to do better when it comes to our

fellow women. There is a quote, and I'm gonna not remember properly who said it, although I wanna say Madeline Albright. But it's something to the effect of, you know, there's a special place in hell for women who don't look out for other women.

Yes. And I, I think that's really true, right? You know, we need to look out for each other and, and be respectful when, when, when anyone is speaking. But when a woman is speaking, there's no, there's no need to interrupt .

Michelle: Completely [00:18:00] agree. Completely agree. What do you have an example of Maybe to give like a real world example of empathy, something that you experienced in, you know, in your role now or one of your past roles where empathy helped you get through a situation with somebody on your team.

Does that question make sense?

Melissa: Yeah, I mean, I think it, it's, it just makes your, your everyday role have greater clarity if you kind of always try to lead from that place. I think leading with empathy means just being aware of what's going on in other people's lives. And, you know, I know today, you know, many of us are still dealing with what happened to us in 2020 and 2021, right?

That was a collectively very traumatic time. , I'm in New York City. It was [00:19:00] unbelievably stressful. We were pretty much the epicenter of Covid. And it profoundly impacted people that I worked with. And even today, you know, yes, the pandemic thankfully is largely behind us, but all of its effects are not.

There are people that have long covid symptoms and we're still figuring out what that means long term, both physically and mentally. You know, people lost their jobs, people lost family members, they lost loved ones. And right now we're coming into colder weather. Not where you are, but definitely where I am.

So personally, like I've had to deal with people on my team that have had specific circumstances where they've needed to adjust the hours that they're in the office due to childcare issues, right? Their child is sick, they need to be home with them.

They can't be in the office. They are way too young to stay at home. And the [00:20:00] childcare usually historically had been a grandparent who is, you know, an older person and immunocompromised and can't risk getting them

sick. And, you know, I, I actually got some, some pushback from other people in the organization about is that fair?

Is it fair for that person to be able to work remotely from home more frequently than other team members? And to me that's a no brainer. Yeah, it's, it's fair because, They're still getting their work done. They were making certain that when there was a absolute need to physically be in the office, if there was something that was absolutely critical that they'd be there in person for, they, they made an arrangement with their spouse, but if it was the kind of day where it was something that could be taken care of over Zoom, over email, over a phone call, they were getting their work done.

And that to [00:21:00] me is what matters. Family matters, your mental and physical health matter, and yeah, getting the work done matters, but to me it doesn't matter where that work gets done from. And I think as long as you're consistent and that's your guiding principle and you treat everybody equally that to me is, is really a win-win.

Because you sort of alluded to it earlier, very, very briefly we're at an interesting point in. American corporate culture. You know, we're talking a lot about, first we talked a lot about the great resignation and then now we're talking about quiet, quitting. People are no longer staying where they don't feel valued.

And I'm seeing people leaving roles when they don't even have another one lined up yet because they've just realized that their mental and physical wellbeing is what matters and their family is what matters. And I think that a really big key to employee retention. [00:22:00]

Michelle: And

Melissa, you're on mute somehow. You got on mute.

Melissa: I know. I'm so sorry. I just fixed that. I dunno what happened there. , I think I was saying a really big component of employee retention and making people feel valued is, is just, that, is empathy, is that flexibility is knowing that, hey, if I need something, if I need to work from home today because the baby is sick, I can make, and it's not gonna impact my performance evaluation, I'm not gonna get put on a performance improvement plan because I needed to work from home for a couple of days.

I think those days are long over, and if they're not, they really should be. We've all had bosses like that, right? I've had bosses that were complete

micromanagers and you had to explain every day that you were out of the office, where you were, what you were doing, how you were gonna be reachable.

Those days should be over.

Michelle: [00:23:00] Yeah. It's I, I love how you pulled that all together. It's actually just this morning a friend of mine shared a It was an article from The Atlantic talking about giving people a mental health day is just a bandaid for burnout. And then they went into talking about how, you know, giving people the flexibility and allowing them to take care of your, their kids when they need to, knowing that the work is gonna get done.

Exactly. I mean, then the article was talking about exactly what you said and you know, they didn't talk about empathy in that article at all, but it was very much in line with what, you know, what what leaders need to to have now is, is empathy. And it goes back to probably what you were saying early on, that it's really a tool that every leader is gonna need to.

Should have today. And it is a, it is learned studies have shown of course, you know, women generally have more empathy innately [00:24:00] than men. As in, I say generally for than the men listening. But men that are, don't have that innate ability. They're able to learn it and develop it, and it becomes, you know, a habit and how they approach their team.

And those leaders, those male leaders that take that take empathy seriously are the ones that succeed in I think a higher percentage at a higher percentage than, than men that don't. And I, I like, I mean, I'm happy to see that trend.

Melissa: Absolutely. I mean, first of all, that's really interesting that the Atlantic, so clearly I need to be writing for the Atlantic, so I'm gonna go speak with them. I would give a much broad perspective. I would include empathy. But I do, I agree with you wholeheartedly. Like empathy is like, I almost think of it as a muscle and you can work it and you can develop it, and then you have muscle memory.

So you kind of have empathy memory. Like the more you practice it, the more it [00:25:00] just becomes an innate part of who you are. And you said something interesting about, you know, like a mental health, giving someone a mental health day, being like a bandaid. I would love, love, love, love, love to see companies stop categorizing their time off and listen.

I know there are some companies that are amazing and they give like unlimited pto. And I know that that isn't right for every company and not every culture can do that, although I do believe studies show that people really do not take over advantage of that when it is offered. But I understand that, that that is always offer for some people, but just not having to separate this is a vacation day, this is a sick day, or you know, having to take a half day, things like that drive me crazy.

I mean, I've worked at companies where, you know, people would literally come to my office with a piece of paper because you [00:26:00] had to get a PTO form signed off on by your manager. And it had to, you know, show what days and was it sick or was it personal or was it vacation? And to me, that's just crazy. I don't need to know why you're taking a day off.

I don't need to know why you're taking three days off it. It's your time. You, you should use it for whatever you see fit. And we also should just use our, our time off better, you know, and I'm, I'm very guilty of this too. I mean, I worked up until the night before my daughter was born and I probably would've been sending emails from the hospital if there was a way for me to have done that.

And we need to learn how to unplug a little bit more, you know? And if you're taking. A day off, take it off and, and enjoy it with a free mind and a free conscience.

Michelle: Yeah, I agree. And that does start with policies. I, I believe, because, you know, I, I, I know in a company that I worked for, [00:27:00] payroll was required to record something as a sick day or a floating holiday or holiday or just one of your personal days.

And that is, that in itself is gonna have, is gonna drive the questioning. And you know, I agree with you. Why, why ask? And it's all about getting the work done. And yeah, it'll be interesting to see how that, that evolves. And oh shoot. I was just gonna say something from what you said. Oh, that's what I, I was gonna say we can share our stories of, of being guilty, of Not taking the appropriate time off because with my my last son, my water broke when I was in the office and I was working late, so

Melissa: okay.

You're worse than me. .

But I think women like, we're kind of programmed that way, right? Like, like we have this enormous amount of guilt that we're not doing [00:28:00] enough. Yeah. And that we're, you know, we're, we need to be releaseable, but it shouldn't be that way.

You should be able to, my God, you should be able to have a baby and enjoy that very, you know, fleeting time of your life because you, you know, as well as I do, like, you turn around and they're full on people. They're not babies anymore. Yes. And you have to enjoy the time, you know. .

Michelle: Yes. Completely agree. I hope people listening take, take that to heart and don't, don't make the mistakes that we did and enjoy the time, because you're right, my sons are in their twenties now.

One is even 30. I realize that he turned 30. And I don't know, it just, you know, these are the times when you think back as a parent, like, oh my God, I wish I could have spent more time, you know, at this age or this age. And you look back at that. So it's yeah, definitely take it cherish. And I, and I do tell, tell that to everybody that I talk to that has kids, you know, cherish [00:29:00] every, every moment.

I know, you know, sometimes being parent can be so frustrating, , especially if you're, you're juggling work and household and managing the kids. And I don't know how people did it during Covid when they had to actually be their teachers as well. But I, I've talked about that before. And I don't know. I, I don't know that I would've been able to manage it.

Melissa: It, it, yeah. I mean, luckily for me so my daughter is a teenager, so while Yes, she was here and she was having remote school and it was definitely painful. It, it was not as bad as, you know, people who had really little kids, you know, kindergarten, first grade, second grade. I mean, that, that was just really, really difficult.

Yeah. Because those kids just really lost, you know, almost an entire year of school. You can't replicate that experience on an iPad no matter how hard you try.

Michelle: I agree. I agree. So I know we only [00:30:00] have 15 minutes left, so I'd love to kind of move our conversation into some more general questions unless you unless there's a thought about empathy that we haven't covered and you wanted to make sure you got that out.

Melissa: No, not at all. Go for it.

Michelle: All right. Well, I'd love to know starting out as a leader, looking back now, what do you wish you would've known that you know now?

Melissa: That's a really good question. I think, I think I have two things if that's okay. So the first, I think you don't have to be perfect. You know, I, I think as women, we really put a lot of pressure on ourselves.

And when I was first in a leadership role, even when I was first just managing people, I was always really afraid of making a mistake. And that's kind of silly, right? Because we're all human, we all make mistakes, we're all going to make mistakes. But I think what's really key is when you make a mistake because you are going to, at some point it's all about how you [00:31:00] handle it.

and what you learn from it. And I think both of those are equally important. I think it's really important you have to own your mistake, you know, trying to hide it or, I mean, never ever, ever try to pass the blame for your mistake. You know, those are just non-starters. So own it, but also try to have a solution even if it's something that is done and invested and there's no way to fix this particular instance, have a solution for what you would've done differently and how you would prevent that mistake from happening again in the future.

And I think it's also really important to just reflect on your mistake, but not in a wallowing, ruminating kind of way, but just to understand like what went into your decision making and what you might have miscalculated and just how you would do it better next time. And then honestly, move. Forward move on.

One of the [00:32:00] absolute worst things that we can do, and I have been very guilty of it in the past and I've really worked on this with myself, is just don't become mired down in what you did wrong, right? Because everybody makes mistakes and continuing to beat yourself up over it is not healthy. So I work in the fashion industry, right?

Every once in a while something would blow up and we would just all look at each other and say, we're not saving lives here. We're making clothes. You know? And that's really important to remember, you know? Yeah. The consequences of your decision with very few exceptions are not life altering. You know, people will forget about this in a hot second.

You just have to learn from it and let it go, and I think that's really important. And the second thing that I wish I would've known and what I really want. our

listeners to know, especially again women, is you [00:33:00] have more impact than you know, and people are looking up to you and learning from you, even if you don't know it.

I kind of tie that back to what we were talking about a minute ago with parenthood, right? Like we're always saying, you know, our kids are little sponges and they learn from you and they emulate you. It's kind of true in the workplace too, and I didn't realize that for a pretty long time. Because I never thought of myself that way.

I never thought of myself as something that people aspired to be. I'm just me. But I remember the first time somebody came to my door and she was not a direct report, she was not even on my team. She worked for one of my cross-functional partners and she asked if she could schedule a meeting with me.

And I said, sure, what do you wanna meet about? And she wanted to hear my story. She wanted to hear how I climbed the corporate ladder and how I got to where I was and how she could follow the same [00:34:00] path and do the same thing. And I was really caught off guard. It had never occurred to me that somebody thought of me that way.

And now those meetings are, you know, as I'm a much more senior person and further along in my career, those, I have a lot of those meetings. I have people that reach out to me fairly frequently from various avenues, you know, different groups that I belong to. Even just, you know, from LinkedIn, people will reach out to me and they wanna speak with me and they wanna learn about my industry and leadership and, and things that I've done.

So I think it's really just important to know that you have more influence than you think you do, and, and people are learning from you all the time.

Michelle: I love that you brought that up. And honestly, this hasn't come up from this perspective at all yet, but we do talk about mentorship and I, I love you giving that that people are looking at, at you and seeing and what you're doing and what you do does matter.

And cuz sometimes it can just feel hard and [00:35:00] sometimes, you know, making the right decision is hard and, but there are people watching in a good way, in a positive way and, and learning from you even though you might not feel that. So I really appreciate you, you bringing that up. And, and that is a good segue into my next question was going to be, did you have a mentor

yourself that you relied on or, or learned from throughout your career or maybe several.

Melissa: Yeah, for sure. And. It's really funny cuz I don't think I ever thought of her as a mentor until much later on. And then looking back, I realize of course she was, but I, I probably wasn't even that wholly cognizant of the term at the time. So I'd say my most important mentor, she's someone who is still a mentor for me and I started working for her I'd say about 15 years ago.

And she's also one of the main reasons that I really learned to lead with empathy and [00:36:00] also to pay more attention to like my mental and physical wellbeing. She was actually, she started out as my boss's boss. So, I was like a step level report to. . And at the time I was, I was a director level role and I was not looking for any opportunity, but one fell in my lap.

That's how these things often go when you're not looking. Things come. And it was a really attractive opportunity. It was, it was higher compensation, but it was a VP level role and huge scope of responsibility. Just loved everything about the opportunity, but I was, I was really conflicted, but I ultimately at the end of the day felt like it was something that I didn't want to pass up.

But my direct boss, the, the person in the middle was traveling overseas and he ended up extending his trip a couple of times and I kind of had to make a decision. I had to, to go one way or the other. And so I went and spoke with [00:37:00] her, my, my boss's boss. And I will never forget her response as long as I live.

, she said that she knew I was capable of a lot more than what I was doing, and that she wished she had an opportunity internally to offer me that would be comparable, but that she didn't. And she said, go with my blessing. And I know that if you don't go, you will always regret it and you'll always wonder what if?

And so you need to do this, you need to go. And that was just amazing. It was speaking with them of leaving bad terms. What she did was so empowering for me because I think there are so many leaders out there, so many people at all levels of the organization that when someone tells them that they're thinking of leaving or that they are leav you know, [00:38:00] to, to quote Mr.

Wonderful on Shark Tank, you know, you're dead to them, right? You don't wanna talk to you anymore. They only wanna know what does it mean to them? Who's gonna pick up the slack, who's gonna do your work, and how much can they get out of you while you're still there? And instead, you know, her response

was a hundred percent about me, what opportunities it would offer for me, how I would grow from it.

And I really view that as a gift and it really helped to shape who I am as a leader of people myself. And what's funny is that the opportunity was amazing. It was everything that I hoped it would be except that it was for a private equity funded brand in 2008. And so for anyone who's listening, who's too young to remember or understand, 2008, that was pretty much one of the worst years of the US economy.

And the brand that I had moved to ended up in bankruptcy. And so I [00:39:00] actually ended up going back to work for the woman who was my mentor. And I had, you know, a very long and happy number of years working for her and working with her. And even though we've both, you know, since moved on to different things, she's still a mentor to me.

I still speak with her very frequently and she's still, you know, my sounding board. If I just, you know, need advice on something, want somebody to hear through what I'm thinking about, you know, she's one of the first people that I'll reach out to. So, a very important person in, in my life.

Michelle: Thank you so much for sharing that.

And I, and I. I love that that actually links back to empathy, right? Because when you told her about your opportunity, she saw it from your perspective and through your lens and what was good for you and was completely on board and supportive of you doing that. So that's [00:40:00] yeah. So, oh my goodness, the time could we switch over to do you have a morning routine or something you do throughout the day that really keeps you balanced and you know, you attribute your mental wellness to too?

Melissa: Yeah, so mornings are, are actually really key for me. And I'm laughing a little bit because. Never ever considered myself a morning person. And I still do not consider myself a morning person. But there is something incredibly sacred for me about that very first cup of coffee. And I have a handful of mugs that I rotate, which all have one comment in our denominator, which is that they are very large and I like to drink them in complete solitude when nobody else is up.

My husband's still sleeping, my daughter's still sleeping. My daughter gets up pretty early for school, but I make sure I get up earlier. Sometimes is literally

only the promise of that coffee that gets me out of bed , [00:41:00] but it does. The only other thing that I try to do regularly is called Morning Pages.

During the pandemic, a friend of mine and I, we started to read a book called The Artist's Way. And I'm not an artist , if you asked me to like, give you five adjectives about myself, creative would not be one of them. But what that book showed me is that there is creativity and artistry in everyone.

And I definitely did not employ or stick with all of the things in the book, but the one that I really did was this habit of writing pages morning pages, and. It's really a technique to kind of clear your head. If something is bothering you, something is troubling you. You just write about it and it doesn't have to be, and it should not be grammatically correct or beautiful prose.

It's literally just kind of like a words view, but then you can start your day. And for me, I feel like it often clears my mind of things that might be nagging at me [00:42:00] and I can kind of put them aside and start my day with a, with a, a fresher mental state.

Michelle: How, how is that different from journaling? So with the journaling, I guess would be more specific questions you're answering.

Is the, is the more, are the morning pages more free flow?

Melissa: A hundred percent free flow? It can literally, when I first started, My writing pages were literally, I don't know what to write about. I have nothing to say, . And then slowly I did start to have things to say. And yeah, it's just free flow. It's whatever's on your mind that day.

It definitely, I felt a little silly at first. I'm not gonna lie. I was like, why am I doing this is ridiculous. But I've actually come to really enjoy it and see the value in it. I, I, it's very therapeutic in a way. Which journaling is too, I'm not a journaler. I, I don't journal. Because, I guess because I do this instead.

And I just kind of like that. I set that intention first [00:43:00] thing in the morning to do it and get it out, out of my system and not have it lingering on my mind.

Michelle: Would you mind sharing the, the, the one that you mentioned before, the morning pages, because the connection was a little unstable and that that cut, it cut out.

Melissa: What I, what I do. Oh, was you aside from the morning pages? Yes. Yeah, yeah. Sure. So while I'm still in bed, before I step on the ground, I say to myself, today is going to be a good day. Got it. Okay. And like I said, I know that sounds really corny and like really, you know, silly but it really does kind of frame your mind that it's gonna be a good day and starting your day out on a positive note.

And nothing bad can ever come of that. And I, and I actually really like, it makes me smile when I do it

Michelle: well, yeah. I'm gonna, I'm gonna try that. I don't think that I've, I think, you know, when I journal I definitely talk about, you know, [00:44:00] what can I be excited about today, what I'm grateful for. But I love just that simple thing of the stretch and the telling myself it's just gonna be a great day.

Speaking of that, is there a song that you go to the most when you need to get a little energy boost or a little confidence boost?

Melissa: Okay. You'll make me show my age here. So pretty much anything from the eighties and I'm sorry for anyone listening who disagrees, but the eighties was definitely the best decade for music. I find myself very nostalgic these days, so the eighties music just brings me back to MTV and music videos and big hair and some very questionable fashion choices.

But it just really, it, it just, you know, it makes me feel young again, right? It brings me back to those days. And I guess if I'm not gonna date myself totally and, and say something more recent I never fail to feel happier and more excited if I hear good as hell, which is Lizzo. ,

Michelle: That's a good one.

Do you have an eighties song [00:45:00] that you like the most?

Melissa: That's like asking me to pick a favorite child. I know and I only have, I only have one biological child, so it's that question. It's easy. No, I, I really like, I really just like anything from that, you know, Duran Duran Def Leppards developer, like just any of those fun upbeat songs and those, you know, you think about how much effort and money and artistry was poured into those music videos and, you know, then all of a sudden MTV basically stopped playing music.

Like, I don't even know if they play videos anymore. I just missed that time and, and, and those songs always kind of bring me back.

Michelle: Yeah, no, that's fair. We, we were driving. To New Orleans and back just in the last week. And some, something made me just get nostalgic and was playing eighties music for half of the ride.

And my, [00:46:00] my husband and I have a very different view of eighties music. So I was letting, I was letting him choose his own eighties music after everyone that I played. So it was, it would be interesting for everybody listening to just hear that mix of music.

Melissa: Yep. Love it or hate it.

Michelle: Are you okay with being on for just a few more minutes?

Yeah, it's totally fine. Okay. So one of the things we started asking just because, well, especially now because Christmas is coming and there's always like, everybody's always looking for good ideas. And I started asking. Is there one thing, like under a hundred dollars that has changed your life in some way, made you more productive or, or now you feel like you can't live without that you've, that you've bought recently?

Melissa: Yeah, so, okay. I have two things here as well that come to mind. This must say something about my personality that I always seem to have like two things. I can never make up my mind, I guess so. But the first one, I live in New York City, as I've mentioned, so anyone [00:47:00] who knows New York City knows that our apartments tend to be on the small side, and our closets tend to be even smaller.

And, you know, both my husband and my daughter will assure you that I have the biggest and best closet in the apartment and they're not wrong. But as a woman working in the fashion industry, you can pretty much imagine what my closet might look like. Pretty crowded, pretty full, pretty overflowing. So you don't have to purchase specific brands.

But I will sing the praises of those very thin profile velvety hangers that are out on the market. Because yeah, clothes take up a lot of space, but you would absolutely be amazed how much of that is taken up by the hangar. And if you switch to these thin profile hangers and make sure they all face the same way.

I know that sounds absurd, but it makes a huge difference. You will find you have a lot more closet space than you thought you did. And I'm just gonna put in a little plug to [00:48:00] be environmentally responsible and please recycle any hangers that you therefore discard. But it, it freed up so much closet space for me.

Like I was absolutely amazed. I kind of bought it. More for aesthetics than really thinking that it was going to make a huge difference in how much I could fit in there. And I was very surprised how much I could fit in there. My other item is very small and more like under \$10 and it's a sleep mask.

And that was life changing for me. I'm a horrible sleeper and any amount of light in my bedroom makes me very unhappy and will wake me up. And no matter how good your blackout shades are, there was always some light that crept through from the side or from the bottom or from the top. And we were actually speaking about this at the office the other day, so I thought this was just acuity that was, you know, unique to me and I was shocked how many people in my office.

Use a sleep mask. [00:49:00] So yes, my husband makes fun of me, and that's okay because it, it has really improved my ability to sleep and not be woken up, you know, by either the sun or by just, you know, traffic, light, car lights, whatever that happens to be coming by. So that's been life changing. .

Michelle: Yeah. I don't know what I do without my sleep mask.

I, it's not, it's it's about too, yeah, it's about blocking the light, but something also is comforting to have that over your eyes when you're sleeping. .

Melissa: Yes. Okay. I maybe, maybe this is like news to nobody. Everyone's gonna be like, yeah, where have you been? Of course we wear a sleep mask cause I can't believe how many people already wear them, so That's funny.

Michelle: Yeah. I actually don't know too many people that do, but I definitely do, and I don't, I I just don't get any, I don't get good sleep if I for some reason forget it when I'm traveling. So that's my first stop is Yeah. [00:50:00] CVS to get a sleep mask because I need it. . Exactly. . So we already talked about the artist's way as a book that has is life changing for you, but is there a book that you've read recently that you would recommend to the audience about leadership or maybe not about leadership that that you found valuable or, or interesting to you?

Melissa: Yeah, so I didn't read it like super recently, but it, it's really one of the ones that had the biggest impact on my life. And so like when I was talking about that intention of like saying out loud you know, like before I even get out of bed that today is going to be a good day. That's something that came from this book and it's called Tiny Habits That Change Everything.

The author I believe is BJ Fogg and. . I just love it because it teaches you very small and very manageable steps to both create [00:51:00] good habits and also to break bad habits. to me it's like, it's kinda like that old joke, you know, how do you eat an elephant? Like one bite at a time? And no, I'm not eating an elephant.

Nobody would eat an elephant. But, you know, you get what it's trying to say. When, when you have this sort of daunting task or this goal that you wanna achieve, and it seems to really break it small steps, and you get there slowly and those small steps become ingrained until there are habits that you just facilitate and incorporate into your day to day life.

I, it, it's one of the best books I've ever read. And I recommend this to people all the time.

Michelle: Thank you. I feel bad saying this, but I do have that book, but I have not read it. I did read Atomic Habits, but I'm gonna pick, I'm gonna pick that one up and, and read it.

Melissa: Okay. Let, let me know. Try it and let me know what you think.

I, I found it wonderful.

Michelle: I will definitely will. I will let you know. [00:52:00] So thank you so much for your time today. This is this has been a great conversation. I'm glad it worked out. I know we've been talking a little while to get you on here and I'm so glad to have you on. We, you've had such valuable advice for everybody.

And I, if you're okay with sharing, is there a way that our listeners can reach out to you if they have any questions or just wanna talk about anything that we've talked about?

Melissa: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, first of all, thank you so much. I really enjoyed speaking with you. It's really been fun and I'm really, I'm thrilled that you found value in what I had to say.

So thank you. And for connecting or reaching out a hundred percent LinkedIn pretty much the only social media I really use. Never had Facebook, don't do much on Instagram other than follow pretty pages and accounts that I like. And honestly I feel like Twitter was a dumpster fire before it became a dumpster fire.

So, LinkedIn is really my one and only, [00:53:00] and very happy to connect there. Anybody that's more than welcome to send me an invitation or you can even just hit follow. I do have creator mode on LinkedIn, so you can easily just follow me as well if you don't wanna actually send a connection invite. But either way is fine.

I really love meeting people on LinkedIn. I have gotten so much value from those relationships and connections, so I welcome more.

Michelle: Great. And do you happen to know your LinkedIn handle? Like how they can find you among all the other Melissa Cohens that are out there? Oh

Melissa: my. Okay. Hang on one second. I will tell you.

Okay. I, I, I know there's a way to do this, the, hold on. Okay, almost there. So you can go to Melissa- Cohen- 8445067. That's my profile.

Michelle: Perfect. Thank you so [00:54:00] much for sharing that. And with that, I appreciate you giving me a little more, little more time than than scheduled and again, had a wonderful conversation and appreciate you being on, and I know we had some other topics that we didn't get to, so maybe in the future we can make a round too and get back on.

Melissa: Absolutely. That would be my pleasure. Thank you so much. I look forward to it.

Michelle: Great. Well, enjoy your day and we'll talk to you soon. Thanks so much. You as well. All right. Bye bye.

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