

127. Turning Workplace Challenges into Opportunities: Strategies for Managing Difficult Employees who you can't fire (including former bosses)

Vanessa 00:00

Welcome to the Empowered brain, the only podcast using science, psychology and coaching to help you rewire your brain and create a life you love with your host, Dr. Vanessa Calderon, a Harvard grad physician, master coach, and mother of two.

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Hello, sweet friends. Welcome back to the podcast, How We Turn Workplace Challenges into opportunities, I cannot wait to share with you some of the strategies that I have used to manage difficult employees, especially the ones you can't fire because those tend to be the biggest kind of sticking points when we're in leadership positions.

Alright, before I jump into the podcast, just one announcement for all of you, I am launching the most incredible mastermind in January of 2024. So in just two months, to kick off 2024, I'm launching an incredible mastermind, where I will take 10 individuals who have a big program a business a project, or a side gig that they want to get off the ground that they've been procrastinating on. So I'm going to take you and I'm going to help you launch that and get it off the ground and have it ready to go and be successful.

So if you have a dream that you've been procrastinating on, this is for you, you're gonna get a combination of direct one-on-one coaching with me. Plus, you're gonna get teaching didactics and group coaching, where I'm going to be walking you through the exact steps, the actions that you need to take to get projects off the ground, it's going to be amazing, you're going to be on fire taking action like you never had before. Because when we work together, I'm an incredible activator, I will remove all the barriers that are in your way I will unlock all of your potential by removing fears by removing any stories you have, especially around money. receiving money is a big story that I experienced with a lot of women, we're going to remove all of those things and we are going to activate you so that you can start taking action like you never have before. You are going to be so proud of yourself by the end of this mastermind by what you've already created. You're gonna be shocked that you were able to create so much in such a short amount of time.

So the mastermind launches the second week of January and it's going to be off the hook. So if you are someone that this is calling out so if this is speaking to you, I want you to take advantage because again I am only taking 10 students and I want you to be one of them. So before it sells out get on the

waitlist, the waitlist will be up the second week of November. And don't worry you will know my loyal listeners you will all know when the waitlist is up I will announce it here and I will put it in the show notes. So you can get on the waitlist right away when the waitlist goes up the second week of November. Enrollment will open in December. And it will close quickly. As soon as we get those 10 individuals which is going to happen fast we are going to close that enrollment. So I am excited and thrilled to help you get your dreams off the ground. So if this is for you keep your eyes and ears out for that waitlist.

Alright, let's get started on today's episode turning workplace challenges into opportunities. Alright, so this comes from inspiration from my own experiences, but also from many of my students. So I teach coach mentor some incredible women who have these big leadership positions. And they're often managing people who are older than they are who are former bosses, or even former colleagues or former friends. And it can feel intimidating. Sometimes when you haven't intentionally thought about how those dynamics shift. Things can get awkward. If you don't intentionally plan, especially if you haven't healed old trauma like internalized racism, or internalized patriarchal oppression that often leads to symptoms of imposter syndrome and other insecurities.

All of these things play a role in how effective we are when it comes to leading and managing people of opposite genders, varying skin colors, and varying religions. And so in today's episode, what we're going to do is we're going to focus on leadership and managing those difficult employees. However, if you are interested in doing your own internalized healing work to decolonize your mind from internalized racism, check out podcast here my podcast series episode 7475 76 on decolonizing your brain odds are that if you identify as a woman, or if you identify as a man, you have also likely been affected by the patriarchy. So if you'd like to do your healing work on internalized sexism or internalized systems of oppression regarding the patriarchy, check out my podcast series on the patriarchy episodes 117 118 119.

Alright, so let's get started on today's person. So first I want to share a story with you of how my own biases my unhealed trauma and my own internalized oppression showed up for me as a leader. So until you the story of someone I'm going to call John, John is this six-foot-four tall, white dude. And he was one of the people that I had to manage at the very first site that I took over as a department chief. So I was very early on my career, literally one year out of residency when I got promoted to department chief and medical director of my first emergency department. And this was a long-established site, it was a high volume site, it was really busy. And when I came on this do, John had been there almost longer than I had been alive, had been the prior medical director, had been a physician for a very long time. So he was much older than I was, and he was also much taller than I was, because if you haven't met me in person, I'm a five-foot-tall, light-skinned Latina, and I had to manage him. And the problem wasn't that I was younger in my career, or that I was five foot tall, or that I was a Latina.

The problem was that I had made all of those things I had made them mean that I was inferior and that I wasn't as good as he was. And so when I had to counsel him, Oh, my gosh, just everything that brought up for me, listen, counseling, any employee is never fun. But counseling someone who you automatically or subconsciously believe you're not as good as or you're inferior to Holy smokes, the opportunities of healing that product for me, were just wild. And I also, you know, I grew up in a home

where there was a lot of yelling, and so screaming or yelling also triggered me, or the potential of screaming yelling would trigger me. And I never knew how he would react in those counseling sessions. So I was also afraid of that part of me getting triggered. Of course, all of this was subconscious and wasn't even in my conscious brain yet. I didn't know that I had internalized racism, or that I had internalized all these systems of oppression, like the patriarchy, or that I had been triggered by all this yelling and screaming as a kid. I didn't know any of that during this time.

But I happened to be the department chief at this place for five years, and I learned a ton and I grew a bunch. And I managed him until he chose to retire at the site. And that is really where this episode comes from. Because I'm going to use John as an example, as I'm going through all of these episodes. Of course, his name is not John, by the way. And I also just want to highlight that when you start in these leadership positions, all of these opportunities that have been in our subconscious brain that we haven't examined yet, they're just opportunities for us to grow, to grow personally, to grow professionally to grow in our leadership abilities. And, when you take the time to learn from them and grow from them, it just really elevates you as a leader.

Alright, let's get started. So I'm going to list off a bunch of different strategies and tactics, we're going to talk through each one, I'm going to share with you how they worked for me how they didn't work for me, and how you can use them for yourself. Alright, the first is when you are managing a difficult employee, especially one who used to be your boss, and may not respect you as a leader, which can be challenging, one of the very first things you can do is you can come from a place of kindness and try to build a positive relationship. So you can try to build a positive relationship. So if you are new to a place where you're leading, and nobody knows you yet, or trusts you yet, the first thing you've got to do is you've got to build that know, like trust factor. The know-like and trust factor.

People need to get to know you, and they have to like you so they can trust you. If you are leading at a place where you've been working for a long time, you already have a hand up if you're somebody who's always been a person of integrity, because people will already trust you. So an easy way to do this is to initiate one-on-one meetings with people. And I know that sounds kind of basic, so I'm going to take this up a notch. Instead of doing those one kind of staged meetings, what I would do is genuinely go out and get to know people wherever they were. If I saw somebody you know, like, for example, I'll talk about one of the housekeepers that I worked with or EDS.

I knew when she was doing her rounds in the department so I would just come out. And as she was emptying the trash can, I would just go out and ask her about her kids or about her day or how things were going and I got to know everything about her. I did the same thing with our radiology techs our charge nurses our bedside nurses with all the physicians with assisted our physician's assistants. I got to know them all on a personal level and knew about their kids and knew about their family vacations. I knew about their favorite places to eat and knew about the cars they drove and why. So this is something I'm going to invite all of you to do, and many of you might have a story around time. That must take so much time.

How do you do that? Aren't you so busy? He doesn't get you behind on your other work. And what I will say is just take that story and put it in the trash can. Because part of your job is to get to know the

people that you work with and build a sense of trust. When you can build that trust, it's going to make the rest of your leadership game so much easier, it will be easier for you to influence change management, and it'll be easier for you to improve culture at the site. When people know you and they trust you, that makes the rest of the leadership game so much easier. So building this into part of your role as a leader is getting to know the people you work with. And see them as human beings, see them as your equals, see them as your team, remove that whatever, whatever place the ego is playing, telling you that you're better than they are. Put that to sleep.

Because, the more you can see everybody is just part of your team, the more effective you will be as a leader. So again, you want to get to know them from a place of genuine curiosity. And do your best to not come from a place that's forced or fake. I know somebody who tried to do this, and it felt so fake every time he'd come to me to talk to me, I just knew it was just like another box, he was ticking and just felt so disingenuous. And people will pick up on that energy. So come from a genuine place of curiosity and caring, find that common ground of shared interest, and remember what they say to you. So next time you see them, you can check back in with them, you can ask them how was your kid's baseball game, or I remember you mentioned you were building an inground pool that ready to go, or I checked out that restaurant you were talking about. Those are the things that are going to get people to trust you, it's going to break down any initial resistance or skepticism they had. Now, I will tell you, I tried this with John, I didn't realize this, but this just naturally came to me when building these positive relationships. It was a natural skill that I had. And I did this with 99.9% of everybody that I worked with in the department and it worked well. But it did not work with my friend, John.

Because John had no interest in becoming my friend. John didn't even respect me, John thought he was smarter than me that he was better than me that he was a way better leader. And he was so resentful and bitter that I had taken his job. So this did not work with John, what I needed to do with John is I needed him to not just know like, and trust me, I needed him to respect me. And so I had to take a different approach. And we'll talk about the different approaches I took as we're going on. So notice that I'm going to list off a bunch of these things, some of these things are going to resonate with you. And you're going to be like, Oh yeah, I can do that with that person. Or Nope, no way would work with that guy. So just take what lands with you, you know, pick and choose whatever you think is going to help you be the most effective leader in your department. Right?

Number two, set clear expectations. So what do I mean by this, you need to clearly define your expectations and the roles, the job roles, and you want to be consistent. So for example, what does success look like? success looks like you not being late being late isn't acceptable, which means you always get to be on time or you get to be early. Not meeting deadlines is unacceptable, which means you always get to meet deadlines, because you have to be a product of your leadership, you have to be a product of what you are preaching. Following up on action items is 100% must not following up is not acceptable, which means you also get to be someone that follows up on your action items. So you want to make sure the employees or the people that you're managing, they know their responsibilities, they know what success looks like.

And let's take this one step further to performance standards. And you want to make sure that you're discussing performance standards, and any behavioral expectations and emphasizing professionalism

and respect in the workplace. And again, be an example of what you are preaching. If, for example, you are trying to create a culture where people are caring and compassionate, you get to be a caring and compassionate leader. If you want to create an environment where people prioritize their well being their family or their mental health, then you get to be an example of that. If you are noticing that people in your workplace are burnt out or exhausted, come from a place of personal responsibility. If you've been leading at that place for a long time. How are you showing up? What kind of what kind of examples? Are you leading? Are you someone who celebrates their time off? Or are you someone that's available 24 hours a day? Or someone who's replying to emails in the middle of the night? So you want to notice how you are leading and how can you shift the culture by being an example of what you want to create? Alright, number three,

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active listening. So by the way, let me just go back to number two, which worked with John, I was super clear about the examples of what success meant. He knew that success was being on time, he had no problem being on time, but I was always on time and I was always early and I would show up before him. And that went a long way with him. He knew that being an excellent clinician was a must. So I was an excellent clinician. I manage difficult patients I intubated difficult intubations and airways And those were the things that he started noticing that he could, like I was he started to respect me as a leader because I was an excellent clinician. But most important, the performance standards, I started being incredibly consistent with what it meant to be successful. And what I did is I removed any sense of punitive we're not punishing anybody.

This is just the objective responsibilities of the role. You get to be here, you get to be excellent, you get to show up on time, and you get to be compassionate and caring with your co-workers. That's just a general expectation. And so whenever John didn't meet those expectations, he understood and saw we were holding everybody to those standards, not just him, which changed the way he showed up. All right, number three is active listening. So you want to create time to listen to your people's concerns and feedback, especially the people who are disgruntled, make time to listen to them. So maybe you create a block during your regular department meetings where you create some time for people just to voice their opinions. And you want to make sure that you're listening actively without interrupting them, or without becoming defensive.

Now, I'm going to be honest with you. This was incredibly hard for me to do in the beginning, especially with John, really with all of my people, but because when I was a young leader, I took everything personally. And anytime anybody complained, I made it about me and my leadership. If the people weren't happy, I needed it to mean that I was causing them to be unhappy and that it was my fault. And it was a big like self-worth conversation that I was having in my head. And so what I would do is as soon as I would hear them complain that I would never even be listening to the end of their sentences, I was already formulating my rebuttal without even giving their complaint any credence. But here's the truth. And here's what I learned the hard way, what I learned is, you will always have blind spots, you will always have blind spots, it doesn't matter how present you are, doesn't matter how unbiased you think you are, it doesn't matter, you know, like how long you've been at a place, you will always have blind spots. And sometimes the complaints that you hear can be valid, especially if they are coming from the people that are your opposites like John. In fact, um, there's this book, I remember reading, it

was about Lincoln, President Lincoln's leadership styles, and the people that he held around his cabinet, and how he would always have people that were his opposites, people that will always disagree with him on his cabinet because he always wanted to hear what they had to say and how they saw things. And that was just so brilliant for me. And I learned that when I was managing John I remember reading that leadership when I was managing John, and seeing him as a gift, instead of the big sore in the bottom of my foot that I kept stepping on. I learned to appreciate his complaints. And then when I would try to roll out new programs, I would ask myself, I wonder what John would say about this, like, what's he gonna say what's going to be his complaint. And the truth is, sometimes his complaints weren't valid at all. And you don't have to always agree with what they're saying, you just have to try your best to understand where they're coming from.

Because when you can at least come from a place of understanding, it's going to remove your blind spots, and it's going to open up your mind to be a better leader because you're going to be listening with objectivity. So listen, and try to do your best to understand where they're coming from. Again, you don't always have to agree with them. But if you could at least understand that might help open up another perspective for you. And that was my experience with John. And then what you want to do is you want to validate their perspective, even if you don't agree with it, even if you don't agree. So even when I didn't agree, it was important for me to validate what they were saying. Because you don't want them to feel like you're shutting them out. Like you don't care about what they're seeing. You want them to feel listened to. You want them to feel respected. You want their perspective, you want them to know that their perspective is being heard and understood. And so I would say things as simple as like, oh, wow, that's interesting. Or I hadn't thought of it that way. Or I understand why you would feel like that. None of that says I agree with them.

None of that says I'm going to do that. It's just that I tried my best to understand and validate where they were coming from. That little bit of validation makes people feel heard. I remember the first time I did that with John and seeing his face. He had this kind of like smirk on his face like yeah, I made a point. And he just kind of nodded up and down. And I didn't agree. But it was so interesting to hear what he had to say. And it was informative to hear that point of view. So you always want to try your best to validate even if you don't agree. And if you can ask any open-ended questions to encourage them to keep sharing. So you can say something as simple as like, Oh, interesting. Tell me more. Or help me understand what you're what you're what you're saying there. Or what did you think about this program? We rolled out just open-ended questions. Let them just talk, it is so helpful for them to hear that you understand. And you value their feedback. All right, that's number three. Number four performance reviews. Alright, we talked a little bit about performance. And I think number two here, but performance reviews, you want to be honest, and you want to give constructive feedback, okay? You want to offer praise and recognition, and they meet or exceed expectations. So of course, during any performance review, you start with the positive first, offer, praise, be super clear, and give examples, not just like you did awesome last month.

But hey, last month, when you were talking with these nurses, they felt respected because of XYZ. Or you've been doing an awesome job following the sepsis Power Plan, whatever it is, offer praise first, and be super specific. And you also want to give constructive feedback, on their opportunities, and also be specific and focus on behavior and results, rather than personal traits. John, for example, was

incredibly rude. He was very pedantic, and he talked down to a lot of the nurses and the younger doctors, but I couldn't say you're rude, I had to be specific. So I had to say, Hey, listen, when you were working with that nurse the other day, and you didn't let her finish her sentence,

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she was perceived as being cut off. Or when you gave sign up to that doctor, and you kept talking over them when they were telling you what they thought was wrong with the patient. That that was that was really, that was taken as a way that was really rude. So I would give examples. So give really specific examples. Alright, so that's your performance review. And, of course, you want to document all of that. So you want to document all of the performance reviews. And I'm going to talk a little bit more documentation here on number five, five is conflict resolution. All right.

So this is probably one of the most important things when you're managing someone who is a problem child, maybe a former boss, maybe someone you can't fire. This is one of the most important things here, you want to address conflicts, as soon as they arise, you want to address them promptly, and you want to address them professionally. Again, one of the most important things because what this does, is it creates a culture of accountability, you start nipping things in the bud from the very beginning. And people know that they're, those actions are not tolerated. And you don't do it from a place of like anger, you do a from a place again, like, these are the standards, this is what we're holding everybody to you did XYZ, that's not acceptable. So as soon as you hear a complaint, you want to create time to address it.

At the beginning of working with, you know, problem employees, this, this piece here might take most of your time, this conflict resolution, because you want to address these face to face or on Zoom, or in a phone call, you want to do your best to not address these over email. Because a lot of nuance gets missed over email. And then there's a back-and-forth email argument email exchange when it could have just been handled with a phone call. So really just do your best to have these face to face, or on a Zoom call or a phone call, that's the best thing to do. And if you can do these, where there's a visual like a zoom, at minimum, you get to pick up on the nuances of the way they reacted, what they did, how do they take that when you can read their facial expressions. So really avoid email to the best of your ability, sometimes you have to do it over email.

But if you don't have to avoid that. And after the conversation, it's great. And I highly recommend you follow up with an email, make sure that you've documented everything that you discussed in the conversation. And that is just for you to cover your butt. But also in the future. If they do it again, you can say, hey, on November 13, this is what we discussed. If you remember, here's the email I sent you. And I'm seeing this behavior again, like what is it that you need so we can support you and like what is that we need to do to make sure that you're not doing this again. And if you notice that you're having the same disagreements, and they're persisting over and over again, then you've got to involve a third party, consider involving HR, if you have an HR department or any third party to be a witness to the conversation, HR is best for a mediator. But if you don't have that bring in for me, I would bring in assistant medical directors, I would bring in the regional director of my site, sometimes the nurse manager, so you want to bring in a third party person that also shows them that this issue is being elevated. So however you think that, whatever you think you need present, if it's HR have HR involved,

if you think you need them at the very first meeting of conflict resolution, get them involved in the first meeting, but you want to have somebody else there if this continues to escalate, and you want to continue to document. So with John, I had my very first meeting by myself and I was so insecure and nervous and I remember thinking, Alright, next time, I'm going to be so much more prepared. So for the next meeting, I made sure I planned it, I had it in my office, I had this really big desk, I elevated my chair, I lowered his chair, and I wore my white coat because I wanted to feel like I belonged in that space, and that I could beat him and that I can counsel him. And so I had the next meeting I had with him, I had it by ourselves for the first 15 minutes. And then I had it already planned, that I was going to bring in a third party for the second half of the meeting.

So I told them, we wanted to talk about these things. And just so you know, I'm going to have HR join us for the second half of the meeting. And boy did that light a fire under him, because he was like, holy smokes, this must be serious, she's bringing an HR and had to do that. And boy did I learn Thank you, John, for making me a better leader. So when you do these things, what you're doing is you are making sure that people know that, hey, man, you're not playing like you are creating a new culture, a new department, a new environment. And we're not bringing that behavior that brings down the you know, the entire vibe of the department or the team down, that's not something you're going to tolerate. It encourages open and respectful communication between the team as well. Alright, so we talked about it, let's see, I'm just going to review everything we discussed already. Because we talked about a lot, we talked about building a positive relationship.

So make sure you build that know-like trust factor. We talked about setting very clear expectations, and you being a product of your product, a product of your leadership, be a product of the culture you want to create. So when you set clear expectations, you get to be consistent and show up the way you want the team to show up. We talked about active listening, listening to what people who don't agree with you have to say, without forming a rebuttal before they're done talking, just really listening, and validating their experience, even if you don't agree. And remember, I gave you that example of Abraham Lincoln. We talked about performance reviews and conflict resolution. And now I already talked about documenting everything. But I'm going to say this one more time. You want to document everything. You want to keep a detailed record of interactions of meetings of performance discussions, and you want to do this in real time. As soon as you finish. This is what I would do.

As soon as I was finished, I had already blocked off an extra 10 minutes because I knew I was going to create 10 minutes of just documenting what happened in that conversation. You want it to be fresh because a million controls and studies have proven that even if you think you remember something a day later, your memory doesn't work that well, and you will start forgetting things. And the more that you try to recall, the more recall, it actually changes the memory changes the actual event. So the more you can do it in real-time, the better. I don't know if you guys remember, but many years back, James Comey, the former director of the FBI, published a book that he had written off on his experiences with Trump.

And the reason why the book got so much credence is because it was so well documented. Because every meeting he had with Trump, he would go back immediately and document everything from like the temperature of the day, you know, what he was wearing, what I was wearing, just to create as many

facts as possible so that if anybody reread it, they're like, oh, yeah, this is very factual. And so that's what you want to do. And then I'm not saying you've got to like, describe exactly what he was wearing or looking like or what he smelled like. But the more facts that you can include in that document, the better. So do your best to document everything, be consistent, and document immediately after. So you can include as much detail as possible. And this is probably one of the most important things. And that's you know your rights, and also your company policies,

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you want to be super clear and familiarize yourself with the employee laws. Employee laws are going to vary from state to state, they're going to vary from county district departments, and organizations. So you want to know the policies. Now, the truth is, you don't have to be an expert, you have an entire HR department to be that brain for you. But you want to get to know the HR department and you want to get super clear on conflict resolution on harassment on performance management. And you want to make sure that you're following proper procedure. Again, this doesn't have to be your area of expertise. The reason why this is important is that you don't want to do all of the things that we just mentioned, to continue to counsel a difficult employee or try to bring them along or try to, you know, change culture, and then get all of that thrown away.

After all, you missed a policy or you didn't follow a company procedure. So you want to be super clear. I was just I made a try my best friend when I had to counsel John because I wanted to make sure that I was doing things by the book so that you know that you always have the book by your side. You can always say well, this was called hospital policy or This was department policy against persistence and being patient, if I can just give you any words of advice is just be patient. Change takes time managing difficult people takes a lot of time, you have to be persistent with your actions, and you have to be patient. And one thing that worked for me that I'm just going to share with all of you is radical acceptance. If you Google my podcast episodes, or just scroll back, I have an entire podcast on just radical acceptance. That made a huge difference for me. What that did for me is I was able to show up and just accept John for who he was, he was going to be a problem child, he was going to, you know, what I said to myself as like, Okay, what if John never changes? What if he never respects me? What if he always shows up arrogant? What if he always shows up thinking he knows best? What if? What if that's who he's just going to be? How do I want to lead? And so I said,

Okay, I want to be someone that like, sees him for who he is. And I would not be surprised every time he does it not get triggered, not get angry, but still hold them accountable, not back down, continue to document, continue to bring HR in, and just have peace, be patient, and create peace with the entire process because it's going to take a while. And that might be one of the most important things you take away from this. These types of employees that you manage, require a lot of patience and persistence. And you don't have to be stressed out every time you do it. You can create peace by accepting them for who they are. Listen to that episode on radical acceptance, if that's the ending for you. All right. So we're friends. We covered a lot and I talked fast today. I think I was on fire today.

So feel free to go back and Listen, there's a lot of really good nuggets, listen to it at a slower speed if you have to, because I know I talked too quickly. And I hope you found a ton of value here. Now if there are any topics that you want me to cover, you can DM me at VanessaCalderonMD on Instagram. And if

you're not already following me, follow me on Instagram at VanessaCalderonMD and I'm going to request that if you love what you're listening to share this podcast with a friend. leave a review. So rate the podcast and leave a review leaving a review helps other listeners follow us. Alright, sweet friends. I will see you next week at yours

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Hey, sweet friends, if you love what you're learning, and then you've got to join us in the journey. It's my all inclusive program and the best community out there giving you the education you never knew you needed to help you create a life you love. Join us at VanessaCalderonmd.com/join. I'll see you there.