

Mary Ellen: From Managing Editor Magazine, this is Margins. If you have content in your job description or you're just interested in how we all talk to each other online, we made this podcast for you. And this season on Margins, we're breaking down the creative process. I'm your host, Mary Ellen Slayter.

Elena: And I'm Elena Valentine.

Elena: All right, Mary Ellen. I'm extremely excited about this particular episode because this is something that I'm constantly thinking about every day. At HR focused companies, the biggest question we have is, how are we building high performing teams? And as business owners, how often are you thinking about this?

Mary Ellen: Daily. Like daily, right? This is actually I think the hardest thing about owning a business, and the hardest thing about leading a team. It's not really about budgets. It's not really about getting clients. It's not really about any of those things. It's how to figure out where you want to go and what people you need around you in order to make that vision happen. Our people are the secret, we got to bring them all together. It is the nitty gritty of the bringing all those awesome people together and having them work on the same thing, and rowing in the same direction, that that's the hard part, right? Like it gets so messy. It can be beautiful when it works, but it can also be super challenging. And I would honestly, Elena, I would love to hear about how you get into the nitty gritty of bringing your folks together and making sure everybody's on the same team. Teach me your ways.

Elena: Oh boy. Well, partly it starts with our hiring process. So as you know, we are all about sharing workplace stories, and we share our own. So I think we start from the get by being pretty transparent about who we are and about what we do, and sometimes that means that a candidate is a great fit, they see themselves as a great fit, or they're going to screen themselves out, and that's okay too. And so one thing that really resonates with me, Bryan Adams from Ph.Creative always says is, "Repel the many to compel the few."

Mary Ellen: But like whenever you're thinking about going out, when you're building out that skillset, like I said, I know that you, when you were building up your business and you're like, "Okay, I need more senior leadership," do you go hire more Elena copies? Do you go hire Elena opposites? Do you hire somebody like Elena adjacent? How do you know what mix of skills and personality to go for? Because I think that's kind of, how do you picture that in your head? Is it explicit? Is it you just going on gut?

Elena: I feel like right now I have the ability to be a lot more on gut than typical. So certainly enterprise companies, way different kind of challenge, right? This is where kind of the AI and all of these other filters come in handy. I mean, I feel like there's a big part of the business, and what I value in it of keeping it super personal, knowing that most all of my colleagues have some sort of direct

connection to me or an ability to know that they can connect with me in that way.

Mary Ellen: Okay. But now let me ... There's another danger in this. Like when I think about this whole likability thing, right? And just feeling it in our gut, that always makes me really nervous. You and I are open minded people about what that could look like in terms of race, in terms of age, in terms of a lot of different factors. But is this not also like hiring people that you're comfortable with and hiring people you hit it off with, isn't this also how we get the whole tech bro scene? Isn't that how that happens too?

Elena: Yeah. There was major research done recently that still said that men were being hired significantly more than women in upper management roles, in part because of the socialization factor. It's because they were hanging out and doing golf and doing whatever. And for women, because they had second shifts at home and having to kind of be more committed to do other things, they weren't taking part in that socialization process. That still very much happens.

Mary Ellen: Well, those things are also class markers too, right? So one of the things that I would find working at the Washington Post, the number of people who all went to the same schools, which they were all good schools, these were all incredibly bright people, but they also all had the same hobbies, and went to vacation in the same places, right? It's like that made a natural easy thing to have a conversation about, but if you weren't socialized into the economic class that they were all part of, that was not a natural thing. So the odds that you would get hired without being able ... You would need to be able to establish rapport in your interviews, but you would ever even get the job if you hadn't had those experiences. I just think it's something we have to be careful about. What makes us like people?

Elena: And I certainly would say from the experts that we're talking to today, and everyone else, clearly to elevate likability as a primary factor is very difficult in this day and age. And that wouldn't certainly be something that I'm checking off necessarily when we're hiring something, but it is just part of the natural bias.

Elena: Ify Walker is the CEO and founder of Offor, a talent brokering organization that works with companies to create high performing teams. In other words, if you can't build your own high performing team, you turn to her. We started our conversation by discussing what it's like when Offor is hired by a new client.

Ify Walker: So for us and our firm, when we come in, we do what we call mutual due diligence. So we will come in and spend an entire day interviewing anywhere between 12 to 15 individuals at every level of the organization, and asking a couple of key questions. So, number one, "What are the top three things that your organization is better at than anyone else in the world?" Number two, "What are the top two to three things your critical friends want you to start doing or stop doing immediately?" And then number three, "What are the

unspoken rules of success here?" And that one is like the one that sort of opens up and sort of creates space for people really just to engage in radical honesty around the things that go unsaid. Not unnoticed, but that go unsaid in this particular organization.

Ify Walker: And then we also ask questions around, "What are the unspoken rules of working for this particular hiring manager or this particular board?" Right? And then finally, "What are the top three to five things that this new hire must accomplish?" And that sort of gets at all the inconsistency. You know, I might think this person needs to accomplish Y, but this other leader thinks they need to accomplish X, and we can sort of surface those things. But really those series of questions then lead us to present our findings to the team, to the organization to say, "Here's what we've observed," right? Like, "Here are the tough things that will stand in the way of you hiring the right person and really building the kind of team that you want, and here are some of the things that are real assets that could also help you as well."

Elena: And so that's interesting, because these kinds of questions, it's not that Ify has to ask them. These are top questions that really any leader who's building a team can ask. And so I'm curious, what are some of the things you heard, down from total, "Whoa, like this is a newbie." To like, "Here's some pretty recurring themes that every time we're asking about kind of the unspoken rules with this hiring manager, you're seeing these things."

Ify Walker: Yeah, good question. So a couple of things. So one, one of the things that we've seen oftentimes, especially when we're working with founders, and founders who have been around for quite some time, is that their leaders will say things like, "You're a micromanager. People can't come in." We're working with one C right now where the report that we presented essentially said, "Look, everything has to go through you. You say that you're empowering your people, but your people do not feel empowered." Here are the direct quotes, right? "There is a sense even from your own board that you don't give people full autonomy for at least 18 to 24 months, right? And so there's some serious concerns about your ability to let go. Here's how it negatively impacts decisions. Here's when people have actually left your organization because they do not feel that they can actually make some real decisions and actually have the freedom to lead, and here's what will happen if you launch this new surge that's for the C-suite hire, and some of those things don't change," right?

Ify Walker: So we're able to come in and say, "We think you need an executive coach. We think these things. Certain things are true," right? So there are things like that that come up, everything from that to we worked with another organization where they were really hoping we would help them hire a chief talent officer, and what actually became really true after talking to the board, talking to staff, was that the leadership team had actually lost confidence in the co-CEOs. And actually their recommendation was, "You all need to step down and you're focusing on the wrong search, the different search," right?

Ify Walker: So you know, in birding these really tough things to the table, whether it's about your own leadership, how that's showing up, the impact it's having on your team, is it time for you to transition? Is there confidence and faith in your leadership? Then we have the job of saying, "No org is perfect," right? Every org has her own brand of crazy. It's actually one of one of our rules. But do you have the ability to actually see it, take it in? Are you defensive about it? Are you willing to confront the brutal facts? Are you willing to deal with those brutal facts? And those are the orgs we love working with, right? Because it's not about perfection. No org is perfect, but it is about your willingness to say, "Look, these facts are ugly. They are uncomfortable, but I'm willing to look them in the eye and actually start getting down to some of the core things that we can address to move our organization forward."

Elena: And what's so fascinating when we think about this topic of building high performing teams, that a lot of what you're saying is less about who we're bringing on as it is who already exists in this organization who needs some very deep self-awareness and reflection in how they work and how they interact with folks. If you were to think about step one, it's like the self-awareness of the actual leadership team themselves. Is that kind of what that would be?

Ify Walker: Absolutely. It's one of the core sort of myths that we are sort of on a mission to just debunk, right? This idea that number one, like in our world, in our hiring world, and you know this, there's this idea that hiring is a meritocracy. That if you're really good, you'll just be great, and you'll survive, and you'll do great in your work. And it's just not true. Hiring is not a meritocracy, and so often there's a focus on the individual. Like, "Is this person the right person?" And there's not, to your point, a focus on, "Is the organizational culture healthy?" Right? Because if it's not, it might reject things that are just like it, but it will certainly reject people who are not like it. It's like an organ, right? Like a body rejecting a new organ.

Ify Walker: And so you've got to make sure that the space here is healthy, and so that is some of the work that, to your point of thinking through what other people can actually do, one of the things that we require for all the clients that we work with and that anyone can do is create your organizational user guide, right? Essentially, "This is how we operate. Here are the unspoken rules." We make it public. Tell candidates who are coming in before they've invested three months in your hiring process or however long in your hiring process, "This is what will make us break," right? "Here's when we will see red," right?

Elena: Okay. This is interesting, because I don't want to confuse this as being sharing cultural values and our mission vision statement. You're talking about something different here. Give me some examples of this. So if what we kind of know of is, "Our employer value proposition, and our mission vision, and our values." You're talking about something specific. Paint that picture.

Ify Walker: Fundamentally different. This is the document that centrally lays out all the things a new hire would discover in their first 30 to 90 days anyway, right? So for example, we worked with an organization where in their FAQ or their user guide, which literally hyperlinked to the job description, under unspoken rules, it said, "This is an organization where white men do really well, and here are the facts. They're all in leadership. They've all been promoted. Here's why. It's not because there's anything inherently wrong, obviously, with leaders of color or with women, but it is because that they have committed for the last two decades to promoting rewarding a certain set of norms and behaviors."

Elena: And they were okay with making that public?

Ify Walker: They raised a holy stink before it went live, but the fact of the matter is, is what we had to say is, "Listen, a couple of things are true. One, it's true. It's inarguable. It's not something that we're ... There's no judgment around. It's just a fact. Like, that is actually who has done really well here. Here are the reasons why. Yes, we are trying to change it," and we put that in the document. Yes. The good news is that they are trying to change it. They're trying to change the course of the next 20 years, but here are the facts, right?

Ify Walker: Or there's another organization where it was just a cultural sort of norm that you could go to bed at 11:00 PM at night and wake up to an invite for a calendar meeting at 7:00 AM, and be expected to attend. And that just happened. Your calendar was public. People could just add meetings. They didn't have to ask permission, and you'd be expected to do it. And the fact of the matter is we try to push people away from sort of judging it as good or bad, and to say, "Is this something that a new hire would discover in the first 30 days? Because if it is, then put it in there," right? Because it just is. It's not good or bad. It just is.

Mary Ellen: When creative teams come together at work, there's usually some sort of official person in charge. But unofficial power dynamics can be even more important when it comes to bringing people together and driving them toward a common vision. I've never seen anyone wield this kind of influence better than Deanna Hartley, who serves as a content lead over at Aon.

Mary Ellen: So when you're thinking about now, so now you're also in a position where you help create your teams, right? I think one of the things that I've noticed with you is even if it's not a formal team, you reach out and grab people that you think will be helpful in whatever initiative. It's like, it's informal team building, I think in part. I feel like you are one of the folks that I've seen, you just grab people. You just recruit people into your little projects.

Deanna Hartley: You couldn't have described me better. I think that for as many maybe eye rolls as you get when you're like, "Let's be a part of this." Or, "Let's start a collaboration meeting." Or, "Let's start an informal team," I think for as many high roles that I get, I think there's so much more, "Yes, let's do this. I need the help. I need the assistance." Or I just think that it sparks innovation so much

more so when you're working cross functionally, which is why I don't like to be put in a box, right? I think that you can bust out a great article and not say no, and you can publish it or whatever, but to be able to really take something to the next level, I think even in the conceptual phase where you're really brainstorming, how this piece is going to turn out, does it work best as an article versus a white paper, versus maybe something more visual like an infographic? Or maybe it lives on social. Maybe it's a video. Maybe it's a podcast.

Deanna Hartley: And so I think right from the conception phase, I think that brainstorming right from the get go is super important. I think bringing in different perspectives, I'm going to use the word diversity in a slightly different way in this context, and it's more diversity of thought, right? So I might not start an unofficial team or collaborative group where it's only writers. I don't actually think that ... It may add value, but at the end of the day, you need someone with different levels of skills and expertise and opinions and backgrounds and technical skills to really be able to round that informal team out. And so that could typically be anyone from a designer, to a social media person, to an events person, to someone with a very strong marketing background, could be someone from product marketing. I think it's a matter of selecting the right people for each collaborative project, because I do think that there's such a thing as too many cooks in the kitchen.

Mary Ellen: So when you're thinking about how you want to build a team, how do you decide who to bring in? Is it about personality? Is it about technical expertise? What do you think is the most important thing when you're building these kinds of teams?

Deanna Hartley: I actually think it's a combination of the two things you just said, right? So I think it is very much so a combination of someone with the right technical skillset or background. For example, if we're working on a website revamp for example, or a new website launch, you definitely want to have someone who's a web developer on the team, right? Because I'm not a coder, but I can lend an eye and lend a hand and sort of bring my perspective that that that person might not have. I do think that's probably the number one thing, would be to look at technical expertise and skillset, and who really would lend value to this project. Like, who are the key players? Without leaving anyone out, you know? So I think that if it's something that you're working on a project that has to do with events, obviously you want to pull in someone with a strong background in that to be able to lend that perspective, even though they might not be doing the creating, but you want to have them probably touch base at different points throughout that project timeline to make sure that you're capturing the vision correctly.

Deanna Hartley: So definitely technical skillset, and then most definitely I would say the right ... I know we overuse the term cultural fit, but I do think there's something to that, right? It has something to do with personalities jelling, and let me take a step back and say that one of the things I invest a lot of time in is building

relationships with the people I work with, oftentimes outside of work and-or just going outside of the workspace itself. That means leaving your desk and going and grabbing a coffee or lunch or dinner or drinks or anything else to make sure that you kind of get to know people on a slightly more personal level, and you're also able to sort of judge whether or not someone would be a good fit coming into a specific type of environment. Because I think that it's so wildly different from project to project to try to figure out who to pull in, but I feel over the course of my career like I've had a better sort of gut feel as to who to pull in or who to invite into specific conversations or projects, because I feel like I know these people already, and I've invested that time sort of doing that background research.

Mary Ellen: If you were to have to distill it down into a word, in terms of what makes for a successful team, and I know you said communication already, but I'm going to make you give me another word. What is the secret to creating an awesome team?

Deanna Hartley: Collaboration. 100%. I think that collaboration leads to innovation, which I think is what the business is looking for. So I think if you're working for an organization of any kind that wants to grow, I think they're looking for innovative ideas. I think they're looking for people to push the boundaries and the envelope, and I think the only way that you get there is true collaboration.

Elena: Research has consistently shown that diverse teams are key to success. But our final guest today, Alida Miranda Wolff, says there's a lot more to creating a successful team than putting people into a room together. Alida's the founder and CEO of Ethos Talent, and she joined me to discuss the care and intention organizations need to put into managing their own teams and what to do when trust breaks down.

Alida M. W.: What comes up for me all the time is that McKinsey study that says that 33% more profitability is happening when your company is diverse. But what that study really should be cited for is saying that diverse teams work together actually a lot worse and they underperform unless there's team development that happens. So think about that. You throw a bunch of people who are totally different from each other into a room. What do they do? They fight. And if you don't work on developing how they communicate with each other, how they think about trust, how they especially, and this is really key, recover from trust breaches, what happens is a whole lot of storming and not a lot of progress.

Alida M. W.: High performance is about getting to a phase where as a team you're able to make decisions based on who is closest to the problem. There is a lot of respect, trust, there are norms for how to work together. Dissent happens quickly and easily, but respectfully, and people are very, very motivated towards one mutual goal instead of competing goals. And in order to get there, there has to be work done to develop the individuals in the group in terms of their skills, but develop how they work together. I often say the two most important questions

that you should ask as a company are, "How are we doing?" Meaning, "How are we doing in our relationships?" And, "How am I doing? How am I doing in my individual performance?" It has to happen at both levels.

Elena: And that's so fascinating. In some ways it feels so simple, right? There's not some fancy technology behind this. So much of this is about reading cues, is about seeing the value of putting people first. But then why is this so hard? What are leaders so afraid of?

Alida M. W.: I think there's a simple answer and then a more complex answer, and that one is the one that I tend to work on the most. So the simple answer is prioritization of time. The reality is, when you become a leader, your entire life becomes meetings. Your job is meetings, but you don't actually understand that until you're so in it that you realize that you are unavailable to your team. That's a simple answer, and not having a lot of awareness around the fact that teams need to be developed. There's a lot of belief that there is organic fit, that people naturally gravitate, that sink or swim works, but it doesn't. Think about any relationship that matters. Think about your marriages, your friendships, even your relationships with your children. That's investment of work, but it is always this negotiation of time.

Alida M. W.: The more complex issue and the one that I've become really interested in is that I don't think we have a good understanding of trust and what it means to trust each other, and I started to work on the trust theory that I have been developing now for the last nine months, because I was realizing that there are all these conversations where people are just missing each other. And I remember sitting down with one of my entrepreneurs, and they were in a great amount of conflict with someone else on the team, and I said, "I just want to point something out. You don't trust this person and this person doesn't trust you." And it was like a light bulb moment for her. And she said, "Well, I know why I don't trust them, but they don't trust me. Why don't they trust me?" And then I started to think about it really clearly.

Alida M. W.: And so the definition that I've come to, which comes from Rachel Botsman, is that trust is a confident relationship to the unknown. This is not how we traditionally define it, but really when you're talking about fear, that's what we're talking about. There is this land of the known and this land of the unknown, and we as humans are very comfortable in the land of the known, because there's this big chasm between the known and the unknown and we could fall down it. And that's all of that risk. That's all of that [inaudible 00:23:35].

Elena: And showing up vulnerable, which is a huge challenge for leaders.

Alida M. W.: Absolutely. And what trust is meant to do is become the bridge between the known and the unknown. But that bridge has to be created. And then the other thing is that we don't think about trust as something that needs to be earned.

We assume that trust is a given or we see trust needs to be built. And this is where I see teams really mess up, because you can't build trust, because that means that the agency is on you. You can't control whether someone trusts you. You can only control whether you're trustworthy. And so when I look at specific challenges on teams, I see breakdowns in the trust competencies. What makes someone trustworthy is how they do things and why they do things.

Alida M. W.: In the how they do things category, there is capability and competency, right? Do they have the skills, the knowledge, the information to do what they say they will do? Reliability, do they do it on time and do they do it with consistent behavior? And then in the why category, it's empathy, and I look at empathy a little bit differently here. So empathy is, "Do I understand the beliefs, the ideas and the overall motivations of another person? Do I understand that my decisions affect them, and do I willingly hear their differing opinions?" And then there's integrity, which is all based around values. "Do I say what I will do and do what I will say, and do I make sure that I'm living by a code when I'm doing this?" And there are always these little fractures that happen in those competencies that make it very difficult to develop a team dynamic and to develop relationships on the team, but also to develop yourself as a performer, which impacts the way the whole team performs.

Elena: Absolutely. So outside of just pure self-awareness, right? I mean, obviously a leader, an organization has to be self aware enough to know, "Hey, there's a breakdown here," and be vulnerable enough to at least accept that. Then what happens next?

Alida M. W.: So there are three things here that I want to emphasize. The first is a simple reframe. I think about trust as the currency of interactions the way that money is the currency of transactions. So if we think about this as a continuous process, "I am always giving and receiving trust," we can go into situations and say, "What is it that I need in order to develop this?" And I often say conflict comes from one of two things. It comes from needs going unmet or boundaries going crossed. And so if we, one, reframe and think about trust as something that is constantly happening and that we're constantly working on, what that leads to is more active listening, open communication, a willingness to respond rather than react. So to take in information, process it and then share out as opposed to just reacting in the moment. So that's one.

Alida M. W.: The second is building some structures that allow for really how you manage the unknown. So one thing I always recommend is establishing meeting norms. Because once you establish meeting norms, you're helping people develop a confident relationship to the unknown, because everybody is agreeing to behaviors and they're committing in front of the rest of the group, and they have to stay committed to those behaviors, which reinforces the sense of trust, but also allows for a meeting to run more effectively, and this idea of taking a systems approach to interpersonal relationships.

Elena: So give us some examples of meeting norms, maybe top three that you're like, absolutely table stakes.

Alida M. W.: So absolutely, come from a curiosity mindset is my number one. So commit to being open, curious and learning, as opposed to committing to being right. So coming from that curiosity mindset. Always address behaviors, not individuals when you're giving feedback in a group discussion. So even when we disagree or offer critiques, we can do so in a way that is fundamentally useful to the group by commenting on what somebody did that specific behavior, not who they are. If you think about saying, "You are wrong," that's actually a really big statement. That's like saying this person, everything about them is wrong, as opposed to, "When you recommended that we look at this situation in this way, it led us in the wrong direction and ultimately made it so that many of us couldn't share our own perspectives." That's a behavior that person can change, not something that is core to who they are.

Alida M. W.: And then another meeting norm that I think is really critical is making sure everyone gets a turn. And it sounds really simple, but it's often forgotten. Giving everyone the space to add to the discussion before taking another turn or interjecting or interrupting is part of what allows for a psychologically safe environment, right? Psychological safety is just feeling like if you share with the group, there won't be big consequences, but it's amazing how many people don't feel that way.

Elena: Wonderful. Great. Yeah. Okay. So moving on from meeting norms, kind of establishing that, what else comes next?

Alida M. W.: How you recover from trust breaches is absolutely critical.

Elena: Yeah, because it's like, "Look, let's just face it. We know it's going to happen. No one's perfect, even if we try hard. So when we have to take failure bows-"

Alida M. W.: Absolutely. So this is the way that I would approach it. So you're going to breach trust. You're going to breach trust. It's going to happen. We're human. We're going to say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing. Or as one of my mentors says, "step in it." It's just going to happen. So when we're in that situation, imagine that you're starting at this high level of trust and then you take a major dip because of your breach of trust. What you do in the ensuing moments totally determines how that team functions moving forward.

Alida M. W.: So the first step is to be responsive, to immediately acknowledge that it has happened. The second step is to take ownership and state that, yes, you have reached trust, and for these reasons. The third is to come from a place of empathy as opposed to defensiveness. Understand that impact matters over intention. No matter how good your intention was, what matters is how the other person or people were impacted. So spend time understanding their

beliefs, their ideas, where they're coming from, how your decision impacted them. Really all of those elements of empathy.

Alida M. W.: And once you understand, set accountability. Talk about how you are going to recover, how you're going to fix it, what steps you're going to take and make sure they're clearly defined and more than one person knows about it. And then this last step that we forget is after we set those next steps, go into a mode of assurance. And what assurance means is consistent communication about how you're progressing and recovering from that breach. The cool thing about this is that when you recover from the trust breach, if you follow that process, you end up with more trust than you had before.

Elena: So that's it for this episode of Margins by Managing Editor. Find us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you listen to podcasts. Subscribe to hear more about our deep dive into the creative process. And if you like what you hear, share us with your friends and rate us on your favorite podcast platform.

Mary Ellen: If you'd like to hear more from the Managing Editor team, there's an easy way to do that. We send out an email every Friday morning and you can join the club at managingeditor.com/subscribe.

Elena: And a special thanks to the only two people out there who are even more adorable than baby Yoda, producer Rex Nu and audio editor Marty McFadden.

Mary Ellen: May the force be with you.