Episode 323: 4 Tactics to Drive Results While Building a Thriving Team with Rachel Cooke

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Mamie Kanfer Stewart 00:00

We know that our job as managers is to drive results and to help our people thrive, but sometimes those two objectives can seem at odds with each other, but thankfully, today's guest is bringing us a new perspective and practical strategies for how we can do both at the same time. Today's guest is Rachel Cooke. Rachel is a workforce activator, speaker and facilitator. She is the founder of Lead Above Noise, a firm specializing in activating teams, and she's the host of The Modern Mentor podcast.

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In addition to the great conversation I have with Rachel, members of Podcast+ get the extended episode where Rachel shares how to navigate different perspectives and push back on the changes that you are trying to implement. Now, here's the conversation.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:14

Are you a manager, boss, or team leader who aspires to level up and unleash your team's full potential? You're listening to the Modern Manager podcast, and I'm your host, Mamie Kanfer Stewart. Each week, I explore effective strategies and provide actionable insights that super charge your management abilities, optimize team performance, and foster a healthy workplace culture. Become a rockstar manager and help your team thrive at themodernmanager.com/more.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:38

Thank you so much for joining me today, Rachel. I'm super excited to talk with you as a fellow podcaster whose show, The Modern Mentor is very similar to The Modern Manager, just kindred spirit all around love it. And we're going to talk about one of the I feel like it's a myth at this point, but it doesn't feel that way all the time, the tension between business results and what's best for people. And I'm so happy that you're here to kind of break that myth and help us find the path forward that activates both in your language. So welcome, awesome.

Rachel Cooke 02:11

Well, thank you so much. I'm so excited to be here, Mamie, thank you.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 02:15

Why don't you kick us off with kind of explaining what is this tension? Because I think we've all experienced it at times, that maybe you can kind of lay it out for us and set the stage.

Rachel Cooke 02:25

You know, leaders in organizations, as you well know, are carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders these days. Right? Leaders themselves are kind of overwhelmed and exhausted, but then they have these teams that they are responsible for. They need to be driving results. They need to be driving engagement, and they're just feeling like, I don't have time for it all. I don't know how to get it all done. You know, one of the things that I hear often in organizations is I need to drive results. I need to drive engagement. I will get to the engagement after I finish the real work. You know, let's, let's do the business work first, and then we'll worry about our people when the business is done. Also spoiler, the business is now done. And so what happens is the people piece tends to take a back seat, combined with the fact that leaders, a lot of times, don't really know what to do about engagement. They know what their teams are unhappy about, but not necessarily how to solve it. And so in that tension between people versus results, results tend to win, people tend to suffer.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 03:25

Yeah, I think your point about like we don't always know what to do with our people, is so, so resonant. And I remember talking to one of my clients about why it was important to have, like, a breakfast for a new employee to come on board. And like, why did they need to take the time out of the work day to do that, versus, like, why can't we just plan an after work, like happy hour thing to celebrate their arrival. And I was like, Well, this is part of work. It's actually celebrating a

new team member. And we don't always know what to do and how to do that. So I think what you're hitting on is so true that it's just easy to fall back on the results, measures, numbers. We got to hit those goals. So what do we do about that? Then just, you know, give me all the answers.

Rachel Cooke 04:13

In all seriousness, it's not that simple, but also in some ways it is, because what I think that managers tend to miss, with no disrespect to managers, I don't think that this has been made as clear as it could be, driving engagement and driving results are not actually two separate conversations. When we understand how to drive both of them together in tandem through small tweaks and actions that are informed by our team, we can actually achieve both at the same time. You know, I love to use this metaphor with my clients. There is this amazing story of a the men's national English rowing team back in the 1990s obviously, a rowing team, of course, you may know this one, but the long and short of it is, you had this rowing team, and they were performing with mediocre results, but they were going to be going to the Sydney Olympics, and they planned to win the gold. They just didn't know how they were going to do it. And so, you know, the captain of the team was trying to pull in all of the best practices. What are the experts saying? You know, what are the other teams doing? And he started pushing his team to the very limit, and they started kind of just hitting a wall. They weren't getting better. No matter how much harder he trained them, they weren't getting better. And he finally had this realization one day that what he needed to do was to look for these small strategies that would serve both outcome and team, and that would help make the boat go faster. That was the only thing he needed to be asking, Will doing this make the boat go faster? He realized that by training his team to the very edges, he was kind of driving results, but he was burning out the team, and so it ultimately did not make the boat go faster. Faster. On the flip side, when he gave the team lots of rest and time to relax and eat and party and enjoy, it served the team, but it didn't serve the outcome, and so it didn't make the boat go faster. What he ultimately realized was that he needed to be looking for training protocols and fueling protocols that would do both. What are the training strategies that will make us better and stronger without overworking, while helping us to stay aligned and connected. What are the nutritional strategies that are going to help us be fueled and nourished, but not heavy and sleepy? And so it was about finding this balance point between what is going to drive results and team, such that our boat goes faster. And I think that we as leaders and organizations are metaphorically all trying to make a boat go faster. So pushing your team to the limits, driving them to near burnout, you may feel like you are driving business, but if it's at the expense of your team, your boat isn't going to go faster. Likewise, when we as leaders think that engagement is, you know, bagels on Fridays and happy hour Tuesdays, it's not really also serving the results. And so therefore that's not making the boat go faster. So I like to work with leaders on utilizing this activation framework as a way of finding the tactics that will help make the boat go faster by serving outcome and team.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 07:09

I'm imagining that for a lot of us, we started with this idea of results in kind of one circle and team engagement in the other circle, and that what you just said is basically bringing them together into a Venn diagram to say that there are some subset of strategies and tactics and approaches that serve them both, and we need to stop thinking of them as two separate circles, and really see that they overlap and find the strategies within that overlap.

Rachel Cooke 07:36

Now the way that I like to help teams understand this is, I say there are three components to doing this. Well, you've got to have a strategy, you've got to have a plan, and you've got to have momentum. To me. The strategy is the framework. You need to know what you're looking for, and the strategy is something that I offer, right? So I will tell a leadership team here's what your strategy is. Your job is to build the plan within that strategy. That is the work of leadership. The strategy, or the framework I like to use, is built on four pillars, and I like to say that as a leader's job, you need to create the conditions in which your teams can effectively do four things and do them really well, so that they serve both outcome and team. You need to help them deliver best work, best results, unencumbered, equipped and empowered. You need to help them develop new skills and capabilities. You need to help them connect to team, to purpose and to customer, and you need to help them thrive, to manage their boundaries and their wellness, to feel appreciated and when we do things well, or when we do these things well, actually, we experience both our results and our employee experiences growing together. So you think about deliver, and you might think, Well, duh, of course, we want our teams to deliver. And yet, how many organizations do you know, spoilers, all of them that invest all of this time and thought and money into attracting the best talent, and we bring them in, and then what happens? We inadvertently, unintentionally, end up obstructing them along the way. We have overwrought processes. We are slow with decision making. We have systems that don't talk to each other, and so as a leader, we need to get our teams to keep us in the loop. Where are you experiencing challenges or frustrations or slowdowns? How can I strip them out? When we do that, we serve the results, but we also serve the team, because Gallup research tells us that the ability to do what I do best is a tough driver of engagement. Likewise, in the realm of development, we know that over 90% of people say that they intend to stay with a company longer if it grows and develops them. People are constantly talking about career development in the employee engagement survey. From an organizational perspective, it's not about development for the sake of development, it's about taking a step back and saying the world is moving in a million miles per hour. We've got new technologies. We've got al we need new skills and capabilities. So what do we need to be training and educating and growing our people around such that they feel invested in but we are also gaining the benefits of their capabilities so that they can do more. When we help our teams connect, it feels great. We love community. We love belonging. We love inclusion. But also when they're connected, they collaborate more effectively. We get more efficient, more holistic ideas. We get psychological safety. We get people comfortable speaking up, asking the quote, unquote dumb questions, or stating the idea,

or flagging the risk saying, hey, leader, I don't think you thought about this. My courage and saying this is possibly going to save us millions of dollars, right? So we are serving both people who experience that belonging and that sense of community, but as an organization, we get the benefit. And finally, health and wellness. When people are well, physically and emotionally, they can set boundaries. People get the benefit of feeling well and healthy and appreciated and valued. And organizations get the benefit of not just their physical presence, but their energetic presence. They are they're there, and they're in it, and they're excited to be there. And so when I get leaders to buy into this framework, these are the four things we don't have to work. Does your compensation have to be fair and reasonable? Sure, does your workplace have to be fundamentally safe with some basic policies that are equitable and reasonable? Sure, those are your table stakes. But if you are looking to grow both results and engagement, you need to figure out how to get your team best able to deliver, develop, connect and thrive.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 11:29

I mean, I'm just listening. I'm like, I want to work in a workplace that does all those four things that sounds amazing and also probably a lot easier to say and harder to actually do. Maybe you could pick one of the four and just walk us through what are some of the more practical things that we can do to start to move ourselves and our team and our organization in the right direction.

Rachel Cooke 11:53

What I like to tell leaders is that the first thing I want you to do is get out of the mindset of I need to find and solve the big problem. What you actually need to do is find the smallest increment of change that is within your locus of control and execute that and then do it again and again and again. I will answer your question. But there is this story that I love to tell about this gentleman that I heard interviewed on a podcast where he had lost 100 pounds for the sake of his health on the advisement of his doctor, and he was talking about how he knew for years how he had to lose this weight. And for years he he sat in paralysis because 100 pounds seemed such an enormous number to achieve, so he just didn't do anything. And then one day, he woke up with this insight that I don't need to lose 100 pounds. I just need to lose one, and then I need to celebrate it and do it again. And he did that 100 times. And that may sound really simplistic, but the mindset behind that is what I really, really love to preach. Don't try to solve for broken decision making across your entire organization. Help your employees identify what is the biggest pain point, where does a decision tend to get broken down or slowed? What do you think is happening and what is something I can do, if not just solve it, then to infuse a little bit of relief into the system. Hey, is there any place I, as your leader, am actually obstructing or slowing things down? What piece of feedback can you give me? I'll talk to organizations who will say, Yeah, we know development is a problem, but we don't have huge budgets to bring in these big, giant programs. And I'll say, Great. Can you help the people on your team start their own

peer coaching circle? Can you invite them to start a book club where they meet once a month? Can you invite them to start a TED Talk club? If you don't have the budget for the book have somebody choose a TED talk each month and lead a discussion about it. Can you have people within your organization who have different areas of subject matter expertise come host a weekly lunch and learn session? Can you just give a little bit more feedback, or make your feedback a little bit more tangible or actionable? If connection is your problem, if you're saying, Well, you know, we're remote and we don't really know each other. We don't have time for trust falls or off site. Fine. Can you build five minutes into the front end of a team meeting and do a quick self care share, what is one self caring thing we each did for each other this week? Can you bring a customer or even some customer feedback into a meeting, just to help remind people that, hey, you know that spreadsheet you've been drowning in for a month that led to the pricing strategy that led to the cost reduction, I want you to hear from this customer how that had impact for you. You're in too many meetings. You're feeling exhausted and overwhelmed. I can't turn off meetings, but can I help you? Can I help you find one meeting a week that maybe you don't need to be in. Can I just say thank you a little more often for things when I see someone going above and beyond, there are these small tweaks that we can make, and the way that we make the most powerful tweaks, by the way, is we actually ask our teens, what will feel most meaningful to you right now? What is your biggest pain point right now? What is your biggest frustration? What is our biggest opportunity right now and then? Not how can we solve it, but what is the first step that we can take, and then from there, we'll find the next step and the next and so when we have this mindset of identifying something big, but then shrinking the change down to the smallest possible increment, and focusing not on implementing best practices, but the right practices for your team based on their needs, their at their energy. This is how I love to see leaders get started. And just getting started is a huge win. You start to feel some success. Your team sees some relief. They feel trust. They feel like, wow. Our leader and listening. Our leader is trying. We're going to keep giving feedback. We're going to participate in this. We're going to feel empowered to shift our experience and enhance results. And it just creates this amazing virtuous cycle. You can't stop it once it starts.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 16:01

I love that you just took my question and made it into a much better question and answered that question instead, which is, let's not just let's not just take one, but let's actually just look at all four. And one of the things you can do to get started the mindset shift and the small behavior. So thank you for making me a better interviewer, by asking, by answering the question I should have asked.

Rachel Cooke 16:19

Oh, that was super generous. I think I'm just not a great listener. But thank you for that.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 16:23

I love this, because what you're saying is something that just is feels so overwhelming, I when I work with clients too, that it feels like we are systemically broken in our organization. So I don't have the support of my boss. I'm trying to do this thing, but it's got a million tangles into this web of bureaucracy and culture and and all the complications that come with all of that. And I love this simplicity of just that's okay those things might all be true. That doesn't need to stop you from taking one small step forward on something that you can do that can have a potentially incredible impact and build over time. So I love that just reminder that we all can can move forward in little ways.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 17:06

I'm wondering if you have a story from a client that you worked with, or from your own life and work that kind of shows how just getting something started on down can, like, lead to something in the future, or can really impact people.

Rachel Cooke 17:19

I really do. And what I love about this story is how big the problem was and how fundamental the solutions were. And I hope that this resonates. So this particular client is a healthcare client, and finding enough here in the US, particularly still a couple years out of the pandemic, we all know that healthcare in the US is a really stressful, challenging place to be navigating right now. There's a lot of burnout. There are staffing shortages still to this day. And so a lot of people working in healthcare are really, really struggling. And so I worked with this one healthcare organization was a hospital where they were dealing with massive burnout, and that burnout was having impact, not only, of course, on the employee experience, but also on their ability to deliver patient care and quality patient experiences. They were understaffed. They were sort of dropping balls. There were no major healthcare emergencies, but patients really felt the strain of what was happening in the organization. And they reached out, and they were like, listen, we know we're understaffed. We know we need more budget and we can't change those things, but is there anything we can do? And they said, I guarantee that there is. I don't know what yet. I need to talk to your teams, but I guarantee we're going to find something. And we found some things like as an example, nursing in particular, is a really, really short staffed space. Right now, organizations hospitals are really struggling to staff up their nurses, and that is challenging. And what that means is nurses are really, really busy. They are working long days. They are often being asked to cover different units, different departments. They don't always know what's what, and when I talked to the nurse, then what I learned was, yeah, we're exhausted and we're burned out, and we need more staff so we can't go to the bathroom. We can't go to the bathroom during the day, because staffing is so short that when the urge strike, I can't find

anybody to cover me, and I can't leave, so I just don't go. And also, so I don't drink water, because you can't drink water if you can't use the bathroom. So now I'm exhausted and I'm dehydrated and I'm uncomfortable. We implemented a bathroom schedule, which sounds absurd, but what this meant was that three times every day, every nurse got to pee, and that has a huge impact on a person who hadn't been able to pee in months. We also discovered that when nurses would be suddenly asked to go cover on different units, every unit had different ways of just stacking their basic supplies, and so nurses were wasting time trying to find the basic supplies they needed to get their job done. And they said, hey, could we just standardize however a unit stashes its supplies? Leave that to us. We that technically that decision is above our pay grade. Can we please have that decision and just execute it? And we did, and it had a huge impact in terms of productivity, because nurses weren't losing their mind looking for stuff which then turned over into patient care. They were less stressed. They were less frazzled. They were able to find the bandages when they needed the bandages. These are two of just super, super many examples that we were able to implement. But when things are painful, the more painful and stressful things are, the more pieces of lower hanging fruit there are probably ripe to be grabbed. And so we were able to implement a huge series we, you know, it also led to, how do we contact physicians and emergencies? You know, we can simplify that protocol. How do we register patients? Can we strip some of the forms out? Because, why is it so complicated? And so ultimately, you. We did not solve in any way the problem of, we need more staff, we need more budget, but we were able to solve some of the most kind of painful, frustrating, incremental problems, and by doing that, we infused a series of bits of relief into their days. We ultimately had these were small increments of increased productivity, but they added up over time, and that increased productivity and increased efficiency ultimately started having a knock on effect on the patient experience. And so you can see how these changes can simultaneously help drive results and experience, even if it really is just about getting to the bathroom.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 21:25

Well, this is such a great example, because it sounds like both of those solutions were zero cost solutions and one time fixes, right? Set up the schedule, set up the closets, and that does not require any kind of ongoing investment, ongoing work, and we're all so busy that things like that make such a huge difference when it's no cost and no ongoing effort, and it just makes life better, and it makes the results better. What a great story.

Rachel Cooke 21:52

Just want to add one more thing, which is no cost, no ongoing effort, no external expert required. Your teams know what they need. They are the experts that you need to add.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 22:02

That is exactly where I was going, which is it can feel sometimes like we need to figure out the solution like we see the problem when you figure out the solution, but in these cases, you're saying, no, actually, your team probably can figure out what needs to happen and what you can do differently. Any thoughts on how we can talk with our team members about this in a way that doesn't set their expectations as more than what we can actually deliver on, but it really engages them in the conversation to identify problems and generate solutions and be part of the work.

Rachel Cooke 22:35

First and foremost, it is about making clear that this is a priority for you and you are here to listen. You are here to learn from them and listen. The worst thing we can do as leaders is say, Hey, do you have any feedback for me? Because the easiest answer is no, right? So we need to start by asking better questions. Hey, I want to make sure that you are better able to deliver, develop, connected, thrive. Let's talk about those mean and then I need to hear from you in each of those pillars, what's working well, and what are one or two pain points and one or two things I can do. So it's asking better questions. That's number one. Number two, it's managing expectations. I asking and listening. I am committing to hearing and considering everything you have to say, and I am committing to circling back and closing the loop. That doesn't necessarily mean I'm committing to implementing everything you ask for, and I need you to understand there are limits to what I can do. So I want to hear what you need. I want to hear what you want. I want to hear why. I promise you to hear without defense, but just for curiosity. I promise to consider everything, and I promise to either take action or to circle back with a rationale as to why I'm not able to right now and when we help to contain those expectations. I say that your job as a leader is to hear and to consider and to be open minded, not necessarily to action everything. And I hear this often from leaders. Well, I know what my team is going to ask for, and I can't do that, so I'm not going to ask. And I always say, ask the question that expectations and find something within their ask that you can do. This is how I love to help leaders get started.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 24:11

That last piece is so important, because many times we can't do everything that they're asking, but there is, like, something small that we can do right? There's some place where we can make a concession or change something in the way that we're working that can just alleviate a little bit, and that can make a huge difference, and just demonstrate that you really, truly are willing to accept feedback, willing to hear ideas and and take a step in the right direction with them, even if it's not a complete overhaul or a complete shift into what they really want.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 24:49

All right, well, we are starting to run out of time. So Rachel, can you tell us about a great manager that you worked for, and what made this person such a fabulous boss?

Rachel Cooke 24:57

I had a leader pretty early in my career, back in the day when I still thought I had to impress everybody. Now I've just owned it. I am what I am. The fact that I really wanted to show up as thoughtful and smart and innovative and all of these things. And I remember she pulled me aside one day and she said to me, Rachel, I want to make sure that you understand what your job is. She said, your job is not to have all of the best ideas. Your job is to make sure all of the best ideas get to the table. And that means sometimes coming up with them, but it also means asking questions, listening, networking with people in and outside of your area of expertise. And the real skill is not generating the ideas, but curating and cultivating and synthesizing and making sense of them. And that was a real, it was a real shakeup for me because she really helped give me a perspective, first of all, on what leadership is, second of all, what the skills are that I think make us great in today's world. I think a lot of us are really focused on what am I talented at? What am I smart about? How can I invent and innovate? And really so much of our job as leaders is to ask and listen and consider and synthesize and find new connections. It just really was a big game changing piece of the device, and it really underlied her whole approach to leading me. It was great.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 26:19

A good lesson for all of us. And where can people learn more about you? Check out your podcast and stay connected to your work.

Rachel Cooke 26:26

I hope they will check out my podcast,The Modern Mentor podcast, they will be able to find you there sooner than later. Also come visit my website, at leadabovenoise.com, I've got lots more stuff on activation, and you can figure out how we might work together if there's interest.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 26:41

Awesome. Well, thank you again, so much for coming on today. And as you mentioned, I look forward to being a guest on your show.

Rachel Cooke 26:47

Can't wait. Thank you.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 26:48

Rachel is providing members of Podcast+ with free access to her Leader Activation worksheet. It's a compliment to the conversation that we just had about activation, what it is, why it matters, and how to achieve it. To get this guest bonus and many more, become a member at themodernmanager.com/more. All the links are in the show notes and they can be delivered to your inbox when you subscribe to my newsletter. Find that at themodernmanager.com. Thanks again for listening. Until next time.