

Episode 349: Turn Dull Virtual Meetings into High-Impact Sessions (On-Air Coaching Session with Jill Molee)

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Mamie Kanfer Stewart 00:00

If you know me, you know that meetings are my jam, so today I'm trying something a little different. Instead of a traditional guest, I am sharing a coaching session I did with a woman about how to improve her meetings. Now, if you liked today's episode and want to hear more coaching sessions on air or you're interested in being a guest for a coaching session, please email me at mayme at maymeks.com and let me know. These on-air coaching sessions can be completely anonymous or a way to show off the great culture that you've already built while getting some targeted coaching for your specific challenges. So please be in touch.

Now before we dive in, a warm welcome to Heath O to Podcast+. Podcast+ is my membership group for managers who want to support the show and get some extra resources to help them implement what they're learning. Membership is 15 a month, and if you sign up now, you will get my members-only workbook for improving your meetings as this week's guest bonus. Check out the benefits of membership and join a community of rockstar managers at themodernmanager.com/more. Now, here's my conversation with Jill.

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 supercharge your management abilities, optimize team performance, and foster a healthy workplace culture. Become a rockstar manager and help your team thrive at bemodernmanager.com/more.

Thank you so much, Jill, for willing to be my experiment here with an on-air coaching call. I'm really excited to talk with you because I love you and your team, and I've gotten to work with you in the past, and it's just such a pleasure to have you on today.

Jill Molee 01:36

I'm so excited to be here. Yeah. Do this test with you.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:54

Yes, exactly. It's an experiment. We're trying it out. So, let's start. Well, I should give some framing here, which is that we're really going to focus in on your meetings. So, to help us understand the context of all these meetings that you're having, can you give us a little bit of a lay of the land of how big your team is? What's your role within the team? How long have you been there? Kind of what industry, or what's the context of your business? Just so we can kind of understand the kinds of meetings that you are typically having.

Jill Molee 02:21

Okay, sure. So I am in education, consulting. I am at the director level of my company and right now managing 14 people. Some are counselors or directly working with. Well, everyone I work with is client-facing; let's put it that way. Everyone I manage is client-facing, which is important to know. One is not directly working, like, with students, but is client-facing. So the client relations coordinator and the rest are directly working with students.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 02:54

Amazing. And of the people who are client-facing, is there any hierarchy within them, or are they all on the front line? None of them have direct reports either?

Jill Molee 03:12

None of them have direct reports.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 03:13

Okay, great. Awesome. Okay, and then you have an awesome boss.

Jill Molee 03:14

I do have an awesome boss. Yes, I do.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 03:19

And you have team members at the other director levels that you collaborate with?

Jill Molee 03:21

Yes, Strong Thought Partnership. Yes. I need them. They're great. Especially in a virtual world. Yes.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 03:31

Yes. Oh. Which is also important. Mm hmm. Is everyone virtual? Or are some of you in office sometimes?

Jill Molee 03:41

Yeah. No. We are 100 percent virtual, which is an interesting management style. I have been with this company for five; it'll be my fifth cycle going through. So fifth year, but I managed virtually for about four years before that. So it's a little bit different managing virtually.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 03:50

Oh yes, yes it is. All right. So now we have a general picture. Tell us about your meetings. Kind of, what do you think is going really well? And maybe let's just start with that. What do you think is going really well in your meetings?

Jill Molee 04:04

I think for my meetings, I definitely have. Hit my stride a lot with your help. I can say that over the course of the years in terms of, I have more of a direction of formatting of the meetings and the agenda structure, and I keep an open agenda, so I add things to the agenda and then I welcome if people have agenda items, because I think that helps them; they have a voice. And I set aside time for those questions, but I really have a, a format where I do housekeeping in the beginning, anything urgent, any updates, anything that I think they should be working on, and then kind of a tracking doc as to like follow up. Did everyone do what they're supposed to do? As of February 5th, we had to send out documents to families. Did that happen? That type of thing, just take a temperature. And then I typically open up my meetings. We meet every other week, every other Wednesday. To questions because the thought partnership is required, and I don't meet one on one with everyone on a regular basis, so they do save their questions. That's taken me some time to do as well to get them. If they email me on Monday, I'm like, if this is not urgent, bring it on Wednesday. Because I have learned how to manage my inbox and like kind of manage my time better with that. I used to jump into every call and I don't.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 05:25

First of all, that is, I'm so proud of you for that because this is one of those things that is so, so hard for managers to do, right? We want to be responsive. We want to make sure that our team members have all the answers and they can keep doing their work. And it's. It's so distracting for us and exhausting for us. So I'm so proud of you that you've made that shift and you have trained yourself to not jump in and also helped cultivate that practice of your team to not send you things all the time, but to save them or put them into that document and bring them to that meeting. So bravo. That's awesome.

Jill Molee 05:58

Yeah. It's painful, but it works. Yes.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 06:02

Is there, if you had a tip for others who wanted to do that? Is there anything from your experience in changing that behavior that you found to be particularly helpful?

Jill Molee 06:10

Right? So definitely. So if anyone knows me, I am not a good delegator and I'm not. And I also try to just move quickly. So I have definitely trained myself to prioritize better, like I, if I get a message, I think to myself, what is the day of the week? What's the month of the year? Is this our busy cycle? Is this really urgent? I have three more phone calls. Maybe getting up and walking for 30 minutes is better than taking this call.

And I can, I, I just prioritize kind of my time a little better. Over what the issue is, of course, if it's, you know, urgent, I just get on the phone and I might walk while I'm on the phone, but I'm learning to kind of take care of myself a little bit better because if I'm not at my best, I've learned I can't manage. So that's literally, yeah, that would be the key thing. It's just kind of a check in. Like, can I, if I take this meeting, am I going to be okay for my, cause I'm client facing as well. So am I going to be okay for the next three meetings where I have to talk to students? Like, what's this? What's it going to do for me? So I guess preserving my inner momentum or peace during the day. Yeah. It's tough. It's not easy.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 07:28

It is not easy, but when you can have that willpower to make those choices, it is so important. Okay. Next question about good things you have going on. So you said you have like a document, a template, and an agenda structure. How did you do that? Like, what does that look like? Is it in a Google Doc? Is it an internal system? Is it the same document every single time that just keeps getting updated?

Jill Molee 07:50

Right. So it's the same document every time it's getting updated, but there are different trackers for different things. So. I manage client relations. So we have a tracker for issues, which is kind of a live doc. It's a live Google doc spreadsheet that we just used to track, and so we can see history. So, like today I had an email about something, and I'm like, I need to go look at the history of that, and it's, it's coming back again. My agendas are Google docs, meeting notes shared with the team, and they can see if I put something new, and I want them to look at the agenda beforehand. Everything's just. Really, through Google Docs, we are starting to create a CRM, so that might, that's going to change a little bit, but for the most part, it's Google Docs.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 08:35

Nice. I always love learning about different meeting techniques inside different teams, because everyone has figured out a system that works for them, which is so cool. Okay, now let's shift. What are some of the challenges that you feel like, or if you could wave a magic wand and fix some of the biggest pain points in your meetings, what would those be?

Jill Molee 08:55

Besides the client relations piece, the counselors that I work with, I think the hardest part is that I consider them all experts. And at times I think they think I'm just going to talk for an hour and I, I want them to, so there are times when I have to say, I am bringing on, I am talking about all the issues or talking about like my college list or what's going on with this student. I need you to kind of engage so, and I don't know if they're just, you know, I've learned people are afraid or intimidated by I don't know what I don't know or asking a question in front of a group. So I just kind of. Ease them into that. Like I asked pointed questions more. So if everyone's being very quiet during say, I have open office hours as well. And so every Tuesday, and if everyone shows up and no one has anything to say, I kind of, I pushed them a little bit. And so it does help and they are understanding that it's okay to share and ask questions.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 09:59

Okay, I have two questions to follow up. First, for your office hours, is that optional? People can choose to come if they have things, but they don't have to.

Jill Molee 10:05

It's optional. People choose to come if they don't want to. It's always the same people.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 10:10

Oh, so interesting. Yes.

Jill Molee 10:11

That's a problem with people not coming.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 10:14

Okay, so we can tackle that one secondly. All right. The other question I have is have you tried different approaches for getting like different ways of getting people to share their questions so they can be anonymous or sharing them in ways that maybe don't put them on the spot?

Jill Molee 10:30

Yeah, we have. I mean, they can always come to me, which they do privately. If it's something that they're just like, like they made a mistake, that's something that they would probably come. To me, privately about, I think that I don't, I have not figured it out why some are open to share everything. And some are like, I'm just here to listen. Like that's impossible. You have 10 students, but and then I just might say, so, you know, Sue, how's your roster going? Like, are your college lists set? Just, I might have to call out a little bit. In a nice way, just kind of like flow it in. Like, what about you, Sue? Like, are you doing okay? Kind of just like, Oh yeah, I'm doing great. Like, I don't really put her on the spot, but I make her realize like, bring her into the group but it's tough. Virtual is tough because I don't have a chance to go into their office. And just, you know, it's all kind of developing that together.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 11:29

Yeah. And in those times when you were all together, is it, is there a thought partnership between the counselors as well? Or is it mostly you, you one on one to them with an, even within a group conversation?

Jill Molee 11:39

The whole purpose of my meetings are thought partnership. I don't want to be the only person talking. And so you want the counselors to talk with each other also. Yeah, I want, I want, I will actually, if someone says, I have this student, here's the profile. We're looking at a college list and that's what we do. Like they'll bring it up on the screen. I will purposely not react. And wait for someone else to talk. And if no one talks, I'll say, who can, you know, I, who else can answer it? Like someone else, like I'll say like, Beth, you have a student similar. What does their college list look like? Like, cause I know everyone's students. So I'll kind of make them engage because otherwise it's just me. It's just the Jill show for an hour, and it's just me talking. And I don't know everything. I know they all think I do. But I don't, and I learn in those meetings that those are for me too. So I, I, I tell them that, so I want them to know that, like, if something great, I'm like, Oh my gosh, that's awesome. I didn't know that I learned something today. Like I know, I'm not just because I kind of manage the deliverables, and the process doesn't mean I'm. The only one that knows everything.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 12:47

Yeah. I mean, this is a challenge for a lot of managers, right? If their team members see them as being the expert or somehow more knowledgeable, and so they don't want to say anything, you know, silly, in front of their boss, who is, you know, the expert.

I'm wondering if you've talked to your team. Just about why you set the meetings with this structure and why you specifically do it as a group and not like you could meet one-on-one with each person and just not have them together, but like what the magic is that you're looking for to help them have that frame when they're entering the conversation so they understand that it's not just a secondary thing that they're sitting there. It's actually the primary thing.

Jill Molee 13:23

Well, the one thing I talk about a lot is community. And building that and it's in a virtual world. That's like always my number one priority with my counselors. I tell them that all the time in the meetings, you know, building community. What else do you need from me? How can I help you? So I in the meetings, I'm always asking that as well. Like, what can we do better, or somebody might chat me, you know, in the chat and be like, Can you stay on for 10 minutes after this? And just what I just want to be as accessible as possible in that way. But I, I explained to them that as a collective group, we are very knowledgeable and that we need each other and our company is based on a team-based approach. There's no one person that can do. The whole thing themselves. And so I just constantly talk about the team.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 14:13

That's awesome. I love how you put it like right at the forefront. And one of the things that I work with companies when I do specifically around meeting things is when they have a certain kind of meeting that's really consistent, which is kind of what you're describing where people are coming, they're bringing their issues with their students, and the group is kind of there to help with that partnership is to give it a certain kind of name. So I don't know if you guys have a special name for this kind of meeting, but to give it a certain kind of name, so everyone knows that's exactly what this meeting is, and then give it a very clear kind of objective statement, which describes kind of what this meeting is really intended to do. And then that goes at the beginning of every single one of the agendas for that meeting. So everyone is always looking at the agenda, and they're seeing that objective statement, exactly what you've already described. This meeting is about thought partnership, learning from each other, helping each other solve problems, and being smarter as a collective than we individually are. And that just helps to kind of soak into people's brains what the things you're already saying. Because sometimes when it's, we say it out loud, it doesn't; it's like a nice, oh, of course, it's nice to say. But when it's like documented, then it becomes real.

Jill Molee 15:22

Yeah, that's a great idea because I think that, yeah, I think that's a great idea. Yeah. I think that they'll go into the meeting, understand that they are, it's a collective, right? It's all of us together. I, I hope they feel like that. Yeah.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 15:39

I'm sure they do because you're a great manager.

Jill Molee 15:44

Thanks. Thank you. Yeah.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 15:45

All right. Let's talk about a different kind of meeting. Is there another type of meeting that you have?

Jill Molee 15:48

Well, I have the group counselor meetings every other week. And then I have the college list officers every week. And then I have a one-on-one every Tuesday with my client relations coordinator. So, and those are trouble troubleshooting. Those, we always have problems, right? Not necessarily like, you know, maybe it might be like a hour's problem or a billing problem or someone that doesn't like. An essay or I don't know, you know, whatever it is, it's not ever, it's just problems, you know, that that's what we deal with or how we're going to communicate some, a new initiative to a family, or what our March email blast might look like. And those are one-on-one with her, and funny because right before this, she sent me two emails with other people copied on them, which was fine. And I just replied, we can do this. This is what we need to do. You know, this is the deliverable. This is what we can talk about. Put it on the agenda for Tuesday because today is Thursday. There's it's not, doesn't have to get like, that's what I mean. Like I didn't have to get done right away, and I'm still training her and kind of letting her know that everything doesn't have to get done. The minute it lands in our lap, like we have to have a thoughtful approach. I'm trying to teach her to just pause before responding to anything. Because she is so client-facing, you know, and we're just thoughtful about our approach. So she, I just said, don't worry about it. We can. We can talk about this Tuesday. This is going to take me more than a minute to think about here.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 17:25

So that's another good reminder for folks too, that sometimes our first instinct to jump in on something isn't actually going to give us our best thinking, like we actually need a little bit of space for something that's emergent. And if we have the time, we can take some time to like, let it percolate, gather more information before we jump into a meeting and try to solve a problem. Do you find that across your different team members that those meetings are, are pretty consistent and go well, or do you feel like it's more dependent on the issue, it's more dependent on the person?

Jill Molee 17:59

Yeah, the college list, the office hours, which are open-ended kind of, I have made a point of making sure everyone knows that this is for college lists only. So if we say we were talking and nobody has a college list, they'll ask, "It sounds horrible. They, I don't know if it sounds horrible. They'll ask permission. They'll say, I have a non-college list question. Can I ask it? Because what was happening is that they were coming that hour for everything.

And then people were there for the intended purpose. weren't getting their college list questions read out. So I just quickly prioritize that. The other thing about those college list office hours this time of year, and I stopped them for about two months. The, in the winter, because we don't really need to have them, is that I find I did this on Tuesday. I ended it early. Like, it's okay to end a meeting early. Which is something I really had to learn. Like, it doesn't mean it wasn't successful; it just means that it's over.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 19:01

That's right. If you accomplish what you needed to, you don't need to grow the size of your fishbowl.

Jill Molee 19:06

Yeah. And that's a hard. That is a hard thing to learn.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 19:11

Yeah. Especially because not only does it feel like, well, we have the time, we should use it. So there's, but also like that, to your point about people coming with other questions, like there's often more things to discuss, even if they're unrelated to the meeting. And so it's very easy to say, Oh, well, we'll just stay on and we'll keep on talking about these other issues when sometimes the people in the original meeting, are not the people who need to be part of those other conversations. And so no one wants to leave early, even though the meeting is officially done. And so it's much better to end the meeting and then hop onto another call with just the person who needs to keep going.

Jill Molee 19:45

Right. Or I'll say, Well, we have the group counselor meeting tomorrow. Let's talk about it there.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 19:50

Perfect.

Jill Molee 19:51

So I am, but I also, the problem with that is I try to be as accessible as possible, almost to a fault sometimes. And I've really worked on is that I don't want them to think I don't care or don't have time because I'm saying we can do that tomorrow. You know what I mean? Like I can kind of sometimes think to myself, should I have just answered it? Like, should I have just taken the 20 minutes, and I'm like, no, these 20 minutes. No. Like, that's not what we're here for. Yeah. It's hard.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 20:28

And also, which I think you're doing a good job, and maybe you want to do it even more, is being really explicit about why you're saying we can't talk about this now or why you're choosing occasionally to say we can talk about this now. Because mostly for our team members, it's actually just about consistency and understanding the expectations. And what gets really confusing is when, like, sometimes it seems like, oh, well, today Jill is in a good mood, and she answered my questions, and then, like, next week I brought questions, and she was just like, save it for tomorrow, and now I don't know what to, am I supposed to bring them? Am I not supposed to bring them? Like, I guess I'll just bring them every time, and then she'll tell me what I'm supposed to do with them. Right? Like, that's what we don't want, is we want people to be confused, or to feel like some days we care about them, and some days we don't. Some days we have time for them, and some days we're too busy. Like, what we want them to feel is, I know the process. I know the expectations. And if something's urgent, we have a path for that. And if something's not urgent, we have our standard practice for that. And so the more you can communicate exactly why you're saying, I know we have 20 minutes right now, but we have tomorrow's meeting that's specifically for this particular activity. And so we're going to follow our procedure, which is bring that topic to tomorrow's conversation, and we'll tackle it then, right? Unless it's urgent. Then we just tackle it in our standard way. And that continues to just reinforce for people, Oh, okay, I got it. Like Jill has a system and it keeps everybody on the same page.

Jill Molee 21:46

Right. I don't want to waste anyone's time, and, like who doesn't want 20 minutes back to their day? So yeah, so that's, those are the three, three set meetings I have. Right now.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 22:02

Awesome alright. Let's talk about this office hours thing where people sometimes are showing up consistently, and other people are never showing up. What do you see as the, the challenge with that? Like why is that a problem if it's optional that some folks don't come?

Jill Molee 22:17

So most of the employees that we work with are contractors, and if it's optional they don't get paid. Hmm. And so it's frustrating because. And I'm working really hard with one of the counselors is that they she she doesn't come I'm assuming that's the reason but no problem like sending me an email Like on Friday about a college list and I said to her That's a great question to bring to the college list office hours. And so then they showed up on this past Tuesday and I let them go first. I said, Oh, you have a question. I remember you have a question for me. And, and they're like, Oh yeah. So I am trying to get them to see the value of going. Because if they see the value, it's worth your time. If you learn something, there's different ways to be compensated at work, right? There's professional development, learning, creating relationships, and then there's pay. So, and I'm sensitive to that. I get that, but contractors are very difficult to work with in that case. Yeah. Yeah, and

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 23:25

I think in general, when we make things optional, there can be a feeling of it's less important, right? I'm not needed. I have other things I want to prioritize over this. And so sometimes when we're making things optional, the intent is actually to say, like, You don't have to come every week, but we actually do want you to come sometimes. And that sometimes could be because you have a specific question. It could also be because this is just another chance for you to learn. It's another chance for you to connect with your team members. It's another chance for you to connect with me. And so we, we might need to like rethink what optional means and communicate out. When something truly, truly, truly is optional and you're just like, I really don't care if you ever come, it's only here for you if you need it. And something that's optional where it's like, we hope you're going to come somewhat consistently, once a month, right? It doesn't have to be every single time, but we do expect you to occasionally attend. It just doesn't have to be every single time.

Jill Molee 24:26

A college list. I can't imagine that people don't have questions.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 24:31

Exactly, and everyone has something that they can contribute to the conversation to their colleagues. Right. Right? As you were saying before, like, people can share their thoughts with each other and that creates better community, better relationships, and helps everybody learn. So there is something valuable about having people come occasionally, even if it's quite optional.

Jill Molee 24:49

Right. And the best thing I learned is when I'll hear, like, that counselors met afterwards and talked, or, you know, they do do that without me. And I, and I'm like, that's good. Yeah. Like you're using, you know, you're using your resources. You should be doing that.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 25:04

Yes. Yes. I hope you celebrate that during one of the meetings where everyone got to see you celebrate that they were connecting offline and making that happen.

Jill Molee 25:12

Right. I'll say it. I'll say, Oh, Stephanie and Eli, like, they connected the other day. That was really cool. They were talking about this. You guys want to share what you learned about the engineering program at Purdue or whatever it was that they, whatever the issue was like, Oh yeah, we met, we share twins, and one's doing this and one's doing that. And so it's really neat. And then I'm like, Oh, I can't wait to see what happens when that happens, because I'm like, it's working.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 25:36

Yes. Good. And the more we celebrate our team members and what they're doing, the more they will continue to do that and role model it for others. So fabulous. Okay. But we have to wrap up here, Jill. Oh. So can you tell us about a great manager that you worked for and what made this person such a fabulous boss?

Jill Molee 25:51

Yes, I can. I will say, when I'm, before I answer this question, the way I have identified a really good manager is from all the managers that I've had over. 30 years that weren't so great, because that's how you can identify. Oh my gosh, this is amazing. I would say one that gives you the space to grow in whatever role you have. And also respects, like kind of how I try to mimic it is wants to hear what you have to say about something or a topic or a concern decision before they give their opinion. I have definitely learned like the beauty of being silent for a little bit from my manager and just listening and understanding and then just having a thoughtful conversation about, but definitely the space to like, kind of figure it out on my own a little bit. And know that if I make a mistake, I can, I have the room to pivot from it.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 26:51

Is there a particular person you're thinking about? Of course.

Jill Molee 26:57

Yeah. My current employer. Yes.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 27:01

We have to give a shout-out to her.

Jill Molee 27:02

Yeah. She definitely gives me room and grace and also makes me feel respected. Honestly.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 27:11

That's awesome. Yeah. That's awesome. And I know her well, and she is also fabulous. I mean, your whole, your whole company. I love getting to work with all of you.

Jill Molee 27:18

Yeah. I mean, I could say more about her, but, you know, we have to close.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 27:22

Yeah. Well, thank you again so much, Jill. I'm going to put, ask you one final question to put you on the spot here, which is, is there something we talked about today that you want to carry forward with you as you return to work?

Jill Molee 27:35

Yeah. I'm definitely going to write a statement on my agendas. We'd like purpose and why we're there. I love that. I love that because then every time it's open, they'll see it. No, I love that because I can say everything I want to say it. I don't know if they're listening, but you know, they don't hear everything, but it Yeah, I love the idea of it being in print.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 27:56

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