Phil: Hello there and welcome to the Emotion at Work podcast. I am your host, Phil Willcox and I am also the founder of Emotion at Work where we are all about enriching lives and reducing harm. Emotion has a wonderful ability to make our lives amazing but get us in a huge amount of trouble and I talk about enriching lives and reducing harm because the work that we do falls into one of those two domains. It's either about working with individuals or teams or companies about what's going on at an emotional level within the organisation, so it could be about culture. How does it feel to work for the organisation? It could be about teams, in terms of whether that be team dynamics or team development or team structure. How do we get the most out of the way that people feel and how can we harness emotion to be a force for good or an energy to drive performance, but of course it could be about emotion in individuals, within somebody. Looking at how it affects them, how it affects their thinking and the impact it can have personally and professionally. Also it is about reducing harm. Emotions can get us into all sorts of trouble. People can play with our emotions if they have intent to deceive us. That could be about me working with organisations in terms of recruitment or investigations or other interviewing approaches. It could also be about helping make sure that when we harness the power of emotion that we do that in a very constructive way because any emotion can be harnessed in both a constructive and a destructive way and often that leads to a conflict within us personally about what we do and I will come back and tell you more about that because I have got a story to share with you a bit later on in the podcast.

So right at the beginning an avid listener would have noticed that I opened with, "Welcome to the Emotion at Work Podcast where we take a deep dive into the human condition" and that is new. I have stolen it from a review from the very kind Owen Ferguson left for this podcast on ITunes and it's headline was a deep dive into the human condition at work and I have been thinking about looking for a strapline for this podcast for a while. Thank you very much Mr Owen Ferguson, I will buy you a pint next time I see you for my strapline of, "A deep dive into the human condition". This podcast is slightly different from all the ones that have gone before it. I wanted to do a listener special where we get questions from listeners which are then listened too and respond to over the course of this podcast. So we have had questions in from five different people and we will cover those questions as we go. Today is going to be all of my voice. Today is going to be you hearing from me in response to questions that have been post.

So I wanted to move straight into that really. One question came in from Patrick Mullarkey on Twitter, he is @mentormullarkey and his question came in on LinkedIn and he said, "Can I ask a personal question that is tenuously linked to identity. What advice would Phil Willcox have given to himself ten years ago?" Ten years ago I was working in a local authority down in Bristol, South Gloucestershire Council at the time and I was working on competency frameworks and I thought they were the best thing ever. The advice I would give myself from ten years ago is ease of on the competency framework approach. The framework that I created in consultation of the wider business was a suite of eight competencies that had five levels. They were contra-indicators and then indicators at levels one, two, three and four. That meant that each competency had twenty behavioural indicators that sat underneath it and if you then looked at that across the eight competency areas. That meant for 160 behavioural indicators and my goodness was it massive. I was so proud of it, I thought it was the best piece of work I had ever done and it was great because

some of the real good things about it was that we integrated it into performance. It became part of the council's approach to their PDPR as they called it, the Performance Development and Personal Review. It also became part of recruitment, so we could use it as a benchmark to recruit against. It also became part of development as well so we linked it in to both specific development programme tools. We had a learning resource centre that had a whole host of digital and physical resources and they were linked to the different competency areas. So if you wanted to develop your team working competence then you could go and find resources that would go and link into that. From one perspective it was a really strong piece of perm HR and learning and development work integrated into these competencies but they were just unwieldy. So my advance to the Phil Willcox of ten years ago is focus more on principles or on guidelines rather than getting into so much intricate detail about what is and isn't okay in the workplace because we ended up making something massive and unwieldy. It wouldn't have been at this stage but I remember shortly before I left I had a conversation with one of the line managers in the direct services part of the council. So direct services is where you have litter pickers, curb layers, surface dressers, that sort of stuff and I sat down with him for about 40 minutes and he just laid it out really clearly to me how inaccessible this was to the vast majority of people that were in his part of the organisation. He said it looks like a corporate dream but in reality it just doesn't work and that really hit me hard, I felt like quite a personal attack in that because this was a project that I had owned across the whole of the… there were 10,000 people who worked across the council and I had owned this project and had to deliver it across everybody. To be told, "This just doesn't work" it doesn't apply, it can't be used in this setting, I took quite personally at the time and I look back and think yeah, I didn't need to. There are other ways of doing it and other ways of going about it that I think would have been much more accessible for people, much more engaging for others as well. I would have done it in a different way, so my advice would be, ease up on the telling people exactly what it is they need to do and how they need to it.

So linked to that, or the way that I am linking to that is a question that came in from Sarah Taylor on LinkedIn because she was talking also about self. She said, "Something I am pondering on a lot these days is the balance between self-acceptance and self-improvement. When does the desire to change aspects of ourselves and our feelings become problematic?" So in response to this one, Sarah I am going to do a couple of things. One I am going to plug the good practices podcast. We seem to be broadcast buddies at the moment, we are recommending each other a lot but I was on that recently talking about self-deception, so you might want to go and have a listen to that. There's different aspects to self-deception but I think in a more direct answer to your question, which is, "When does the desire to change aspects of ourselves and our feelings become problematic?" So I think it can become problematic when we interact with others, so especially if we are looking to change who we are in the context of other people who we work with and or/know as well. So if we start to do different things or respond in different ways it is because we want to change how that is. If I think about an occasion I had in the past where I spent a long time saying I didn't like somebody, privately, when I had been with colleagues, or we had been in the pub or I had been with friends from work and we talk about an individual in the workplace and I say that I didn't like them, I didn't like their approach or their methods or what they did and then I was forced to work with them quite closely for a period of time and when I got to understand them a lot better from spending a lot of time with them working with them on this particular work that we did it changed my perspective on them. It made me really think about everything that was going on for them, what was happening for

them in their part of the business and in the world that they worked in and then what would happen is, when I would be back with those same friends or colleagues and that person would come up in conversation I would then change how I felt about it because I would then start supporting that individual and defending that individual and that became quite problematic because what I was saying A had changed because I was being inconsistent with how I had been in the past, but also it was inconsistent with the narrative that we'd all created around the individual and this is what happens in interaction. We often create narratives or scripts, so when we start talking about this, then these are the things that people say. I have noticed that I say, "You know" a lot and I am trying to catch myself when I do it. So if I ask you to think of family gatherings or team meetings of people that know each other well, when a particular topic comes up you can almost predict where that conversation is going to go. You can predict the anecdotes that are going to be used. The stories that are going to be shared, the discussions that are going to be had because we fall into script mode where we predetermine what we are going to say so often in that kind of personal development or personal change, especially if we are looking to change aspects of ourselves or our feelings then that can become problematic in the interactions with others and on a different podcast that I have done I talk about how…the second episode with Ben Fletcher and we were talking about purpose I talked about how for some individuals it can be quite liberating to move from one organisation to the next. So to leave an organisation and go into a new one and get a promotion because you needed to renegotiate or re-evaluate or re-assess or re-assert your thoughts or feelings or views or aspects of yourself can be easier when you are moving to a place where people don't know you. So it is easier to let go of those things that you had or things that you said or things that you did because you can move to a different place and re-invent yourself in that way. There is two aspects to my answer, one is it can become problematic when we are interacting with others. I think it can also become problematic with ourselves because something that is valued in society in general is consistency. It is acting in ways that are consistent with how you have acted before and if you say you are going to do this and you deliver on it. One of the key principles of influence is consistency. Once you get somebody to make a commitment, to make a statement to say this is what we are going to do or this is what I think, or this is what I believe, any of those sorts of things then humans will feel more compelled to act in line. So if we have been saying for a long-time, this is what I am like, this is who I am, this is what I do, this is what I think or this is how I feel it can be hard to change that within ourselves even if we notice it changing. Potentially a contrived example but for ages my wife has been trying to get me to join her inner smoothie, replacing a meal a day with a smoothie that is made up of lots of different types of fruit and then other ingredients that are put in to help improve digestion and energy release and I have been avoiding it like the plague for quite a while and then in the past week I have had two and I have really enjoyed it and as I was making my lunch today, as I record this podcast at three o' clock on an afternoon I found myself thinking ahh, I quite fancy a juice today and then not making one and having a sandwich instead and I found that interesting that even though I knew I fancied having a smoothing I still choose to not have one and have what I would normally have because I was feeling a bit rough as you can probably hear from the recording. I am quite bunged up, so I wanted some comfort food instead but actually, thinking about it, if I have a cold which I think I have, having the antioxidants that go into fruit is much healthier than white bread, pickle, cheese, ham and lettuce. So what was counter intuitive, I haven't helped myself, so in the same way that when we have done something for so long and we then try and do something different it can be hard for us to admit to ourselves that that is what we want to do. Also it can be hard for others to go along with that and support that as well. I think there can be a few different

problematic bits to it and I am tempted, even though you didn't ask me to do it, I am tempted to dip into…"Well what can we do to overcome some of those problems then? How can we make that less problematic?" So for example, if I play that out, when I was in those interactions talking about the person I was mentioning earlier on and the physiological pressure that I felt to conform with the view that I had expressed in the past was quite strong and then to deal with the confusion and the challenge from other people around was also quite difficult to do. I think there is a couple of things we can do. One of those is we can do it very openly. We can overtly talk about what we are doing. In a slightly different example I have been working with a client recently on a leadership development programme and one of the things that I actively encourage is for the participants in the programme to engage with their immediate peers and teams and / or supervisors and talk about the fact that they are going to be experimenting and this is the frame that we have put around it. They are going to be experimenting with doing different things. They are going to be experimenting with working in different ways. They are going to be experimenting with approaching things in a different manner. They will be experimenting with having conversations in a different way. We have been encouraging the participants to be very overt and giving them strategies to help them with that overtness in saying, "I am going to experiment with doing things differently". You can also encourage for feedback on that. So you can encourage people to share how it works for them, what do they experience when the participants do something differently. So they approach a conversation about a workplace problem in a coaching way as opposed to a given solution way. Because we are framing it as an experiment we are hoping that the feedback will be more open and more common in its occurrence because of the way that we have positioned it. So for that personal change in terms of aspects of ourselves or our feelings then we can be overt about it. The other thing we can do about it is we can be more covert about it if we want to change. Could you argue this is verging on deception, maybe, or somewhere on the deception spectrum anyway. So we can be more covert about it and practise it in different context with different people. So if I think about my example, rather than changing my view on this individual in the wider discussion I could have explored it in more one to one discussions with the people that had a different view to me and then experiment with sharing. Oh you know what, "They are not that bad really, yeah but if you think about what is happening for them over there it could be like this or like that" and by exploring it in a more intimate setting with one other person you can get a gage or a view for what's the response. How are your colleagues or how are others responding to the changes that you wanted to make.

When it comes to thinking about for yourself from a self-point of view, I am huge fan of journaling. I actually audio general, rather than a written journal. One of the things I do is I talk to myself through a phone or I will go for a walk and I will do my reflections whilst I am walking. I find I reflect more effectively when I walk rather than when I am writing things down and then I go back and listen to my recordings and take any notes that I want to take off the back of it. When it comes to doing it from a self-point of view I would encourage journaling as way of doing that so deliberately choosing to experiment with changing something and then make sure you capture what that experience was like? How did it feel when you did it? What impact if any did it have? How did it go afterwards? How it felt in the lead up? If you were feeling anxious, or frustrated or excited, how did that play out through to the execution, or the implementation of the change that you wanted to make. So we started with something that you have been pondering on, "What is the balance between self-acceptance and self-improvement when there is a desire to change aspects of

ourselves when things become problematic". So I hope that has given you a good response Sarah or a thoughtful response anyway.

So having taken a small drink our next question is from Ross Garner. Ross works at Good Practise and you can find him on Twitter @RossGarnerGP and his question comes in response to podcast episode five I think where I talked with Georgia Nightinghall and I talked about identity and negotiation in conversation and how the ritualistic aspects of conversation can be both limiting and I think what Ross is getting at with our conversation rituals are useful crutch, is actually can they be helpful in some ways and absolutely they can. One of the risks, one of the downsides of conversation rituals is that you can miss out on a different conversation. So by going through the standard, "Hi, how are you? Yeah I am good. And you? Yeah I am well thanks" and then moving on, by asking a completely different question you can get a very different conversation which can potentially be deeper and more enriching. So you might use a question like what makes a person a good travelling companion? And that might be a bit hard to slot in as an opener to a conversation. So if somebody said, "Hi" and you go, "What makes a person a good travelling companion" that might have been incongruent to start it off but asking different questions can really take the conversation in a different way. At the same time, if you are in a rush or you don't really want to talk about what you are thinking or how you are feeling then those conversation rituals can be a useful crutch because they can allow you to transact through conversation really quickly remaining polite and courteous and also not taking off in a different direction. Yes, I think conversation rituals can be a useful crutch, context dependant. I always talk about how context is everything, so I think that using those conversation rituals can be helpful in that way.

The next, we have two questions from Annette Hill and Anette is on Twitter and her handle is @familyhrguru and her question has come in response to the latest podcast which is where we talk about leadership and vulnerability and near enemies of things with Khrushed Dehnugara and Claire Genkai-Breeze. Annette's first question was when the idea of collaboration, sharing stories and social leadership is very current, is the need to keep this valid and grounded in what is happening now even more acute? So in short, yes I think it is because there is a risk that these things become tasks to be done and I know this is something that Claire and Khurshed have talked about in the past that we see story telling or we see social leadership or we see collaboration as a thing that we should do. I need to do my social judicial bit now and that is not what it is about. It is about, is now an opportune or appropriate moment for me to do some of these things. So if we want to make sure that it is genuine and authentic we can explore and extrapolate on what genuine and authentic means, but if we want people to truly collaborate and share genuine stories and use that social leadership as a way of enabling or leading through others then it has to be grounded in what is happening now because if it is not for me it really risks undermining the validity of what is happening and what is going on. So I then get to thinking how do we do that then? What can we do to help that? And I am not sure as I sit here recording it, so I am going to have to think about that some more in my reflections for this podcast. I didn't go into the, so what can we do about it? I just went into my thinking. If anything else comes to me before we finish recording then I will add that in.

So secondly from Annette how do we encourage and value this gradual and incremental way of learning. So again in the podcast with Khurshed and Claire we talked about the, I don't know if it is the preference or the seeming celebration of epiphany moments about how leaders or individuals

have an epiphany and that has a substantial impact on their practice or their approaches or their methods or their future and individuals use that epiphany moment to continually talk about and share as an example of this is what's fundamentally changed me, whereas actually changing can be much more incremental in that way and I found a really interesting piece which I will put a link to in the show notes. It is a chapter from a book around reflection and reflexivity. I was also reading a paper by Liam Moore about the importance of reflexivity but this is called reflection and reflexivity and I will put a link to it in the show notes. Within that it uses the example of reflection or reflective practise, it talks about a lot of evidence to say it is a wholly beneficial and useful thing to do but it almost implies the staticness that you are sat still in front of something looking at the reflection so is reflective practise just about sitting down and looking at yourself and thinking or is it more than that. If you look at a dictionary definition for reflectivity and we are talking about not just cause and effect but then linking it back to the effect to the cause and how changing in the course can change the effect and changing the effect can change the course. So it is much more of a dynamic dual process as opposed to a purpose and just being a static just looking in the mirror, reflectivity is a constant assessment of what is happening and what is going on and how one thing is affecting another which I think is a really beneficial practise to do. To be thinking about when I did this, it meant that, that made me feel this, so therefore I want to do this with that or about that. One of the habits that I have, especially after interactions with others is to think very deeply about it often if I think about a workshop I have facilitated I will break that workshop down into sections or chunks and when I go back to my memory of that event I'll think about what happened, how did it go, what did I do and what did I say and what impact did it have and how did other people's actions support or challenge the impact that I think that had. I did this and I approached the activity in this way, people got really engaged and I saw these things as the outcomes and therefore this is what I want to do next time, whether it will be replication or change. But it is a real constant habit that I have got myself into and I think in terms of the question that you asked which was how do we encourage and value this gradual and incremental way of learning I think there is a long way to go to do that. I don't think that is a practise that is genuinely valued. Even if we think about something like a performance appraisal that doesn't, by its process it doesn't encourage a gradual incremental way of learning. What it encourages is for you to think twice a year, or once a year depending on what it is and what is going on. So I think even the processes and procedures we have in place hinder the value to that gradual and incremental way of learning. So I think there is definitely more to do. That is all the questions. That is all five questions, so thank you to Annette, thank you to Ross, thank you to Patrick and thank you to Sarah for sending your questions in. I hope my responses have been useful and I will put links to any research and so on that I have talked about into the show notes as well.

I forgot I said at the start of the podcast I was going to tell a story that linked to these questions. It links into the different aspects of some of them. Sarah talked about the balance of self-acceptance and self-improvement and then what advice would you give to yourself a number of years ago from Patrick and then from Annette around how do we encourage a gradual incremental way of learning. So I was on holiday recently in the lovely North Yorkshire area, now I live in Lincolnshire and Lincolnshire is very flat. North Yorkshire on the other hand, very hilly, my children got to experience the joy of riding scooters down hills. Now you can probably guess where this story is going so I was stood at the bottom of one of those hills, my son was coming down and I could see from about half way down that he was losing control of the scooter and I called out, "Be safe" and he called out, "I am" and I could see that he was losing balance even more, so I said, "Be safe" because I was

conscious that I did not want to tell him not to fall over because that would encourage him to fall over as opposed to saying, "Be safe" and sure enough as he came down the hill he fell over and grazed his knee and grazed his chin and had plasters and cried and so on and so on and as I was walking him back to the accommodation with cuts and bruises. It got me thinking about, why did I choose to A, get involved, did my commenting of, "Be safe", because that comes with an implication of, not a direct implication but an indirect implication that what you are doing is currently unsafe so if I hadn't of said anything, would he still have fallen over. Now my second thought was why didn't I save him for want of a better phrase because I could have ran up the hill towards him and I could have stopped the scooter and I chose not to. That was a conscious choice because I wanted him to fall over, that is not true, I didn't want him to fall over, I wanted him to learn from that experience. As he was coming down the hill I could see him losing his balance and whether I did this on reflection or whether I did it I don't actually know, I assessed the situation and I thought this isn't going to be life threatening. This fall isn't going to cause a major injury. It is unlikely that it will break and it certainly will not cause any life threatening injuries so therefore I am going to see how it goes because I wanted him to learn the experience of either him saving his balance of coming down the hill or him falling and it hurting and him learning from that as well and I think as I sat back in our accommodation and reflected after on the experience I was thinking would I go back and do that again. Would I go back and let him fall over and I think I would and I can also think of examples of where in the workplace I have allowed members of my team or colleagues to fall over because of the learning experience that that is going to give and that goes against some of my values. I have mentioned on this podcast a couple of times on the podcast episode with Khurshed and Claire, I said because I care a lot about what happens in the workplace and the way it affects people's lives, that that caring too much can tip into or I can have a near enemy of trying to save people or save things and getting too involved and it was really interesting experience making that choice of not getting involved on saving him. Wondering whether my articulation had an impact of him falling or not, but also giving him that learning experience. Why am I sharing that story? I think because it's a dilemma that I face regularly at work and with my children and it links into the questions that have come in from the podcast today so I thought it would be useful to share.

Thank you very much for listening today, thank you for subscribing to the podcast. If you wanted to leave me a review on ITunes then I would be exceptionally grateful and other than that thank you for listening to this special episode. If you liked it, then tell me, if you didn't tell me. It would be really good to know what you think. Thanks very much.