

## Episode 76

### Emotion at Work in Creating Joy and Connection with Simon Blake

Phil Willcox

Hello and welcome to the Emotion at Work podcast, where we place emotion at the heart of the people, the processes and the place of work. And today we're focusing on both the people and the place element, I think, because our guest today is a thought leader for mental health, for workplace wellbeing, equality and inclusion, and as the CEO of Mental Health First Aid England, he writes on their blog, contributes to media articles, as well as speaking and facilitating mental health and wellbeing events. So I think it's safe to say we've got a credible voice on the podcast today. So let's welcome to the podcast Simon Blake. Hi, Simon.

Simon Blake

Hi, Phil. Nice to be here. Thanks for inviting me.

Phil Willcox

Oh, thank you very much for coming on. When we had our off air conversation, I really, really enjoyed it, and I think the audience are going to enjoy our episode today as well. So, yeah, really good. That's really good. And as always for this podcast then, we begin with our unexpected yet innocuous question. And what I'd like to ask today, and in the question has got the word recently, and I will leave you to interpret the word recently as broadly as you like. So, with the context that you can interpret recently as broad as you like, what have you done recently for the first time?

Simon Blake

Oh, what have I done recently for the first time? I went on a horseback safari in South Africa before Christmas.

Phil Willcox

Wow.

Simon Blake

So I was 50 in January, and on my 40th birthday, I wrote down ten things that I wanted to either change or do by the time I was 50. And the only thing I hadn't done when I was about nine months out was go on horseback safari. And I couldn't actually really afford to do it, so I found one to volunteer on, and it was really amazing.

Phil Willcox

Oh, wow. So what was the voluntary element then? Was that for a particular cause or...?

Simon Blake

No. So you're actually volunteering on looking after the horses and supporting people on the rides.  
So it was very hands on horse care.

Phil Willcox

Fantastic. You know what? I've never ridden a horse ever. I've not been on...

Simon Blake

Have you not? It's my hobby.

Phil Willcox

I think I've been on a donkey on Western-super-Mare beach and probably on a Lincolnshire beach at some point in my time. But, yeah, I don't think I've ever been on a horse. And what is it about horse riding that makes it one of your favourite things to do, then?

Simon Blake

It always has been. I remember when I was about five or six, so I grew up in Cornwall, and went to a family friend's house, and they had ponies, and I was put on a pony called Toby. And I can remember it vividly now, how he looked, where were, and the feeling, and I never wanted to get off. And we had another family friend with us, and she was called Tanya, and she was the same age as me, and when it was the end of my turn, it was her turn to get onto Toby, and I've never felt so much something in all of my life when she got on him. And I've just loved it ever since.

Phil Willcox

Wow. Wow. That's incredible. And I love that you can remember it so vividly as well. That's amazing. That's brilliant. So my thing that I did for the first time recently was some demolition. So over the weekend, we had an outbuilding that was, well, we bought our house where we live now, nearly six years ago, and when we bought it, we said, this is one of the first things we need to do, because it's in a state of disrepair. And six years later, it was still going, but the roof was just bowing so badly. And the bottom two runs of planks of wood were missing one side of it as well. It was in a very poor state of repair. So I did some demolition on the weekend. And, yeah, it was good. I wasn't sure I would be capable of doing the demolition that I did, but I did manage to take the outbuilding down in about, I don't know, three and a half, four hours, I think. But the downside was the skip wasn't here to fill. So the skip came Wednesday for me to fill up, and I think it took me nearly five hours to move the demolished outbuilding into the skip last night. So my legs and my shoulders are very achy today from wheelbarrowing.

Simon Blake

You did it all by hand?

Phil Willcox

Yeah, I did it all by hand, yeah. So I had a bit of help with some tools. And my next door neighbour is a carpenter, so when it got to the brace at the top of the roof, because it was a wooden building, so it wasn't a brick building, but it was a wooden structure, but when it got to the brace in the middle, I had my hand saw out trying to saw through the brace, and he was like, "Shall I just get my circular saw for you, Phil?" I was like, "If you wouldn't mind, that'd be amazing." So he came out with a circular saw and then just took it out, but it was good. So I had a little bit of help with on that front. Yeah, it was good. I just had my earphones in, had all my PPE on and away I went. So, yeah, that was good fun.

Simon Blake

Amazing. Have you heard of The Minack Theatre in Cornwall?

Phil Willcox

Yes, I've been a couple of times, actually. Yeah, my parents took me there twice.

Simon Blake

Did you read the story of how the woman who owned it and made it, did it all by hand?

Phil Willcox

No, I don't remember that at all.

Simon Blake

So there's a picture of her in the café and shop at the top of the Minack, as you go out, there is a storyboard of how single handedly managed to make that theatre in the side of the cliff with a wheelbarrow, and who knows what other equipment. But I just couldn't believe it when I saw it.

Phil Willcox

Wow. No, I don't remember that at all. My parents took me when I was, I suppose I was young maybe, like early teens, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen maybe, something like that. We went a couple of times. But, no, I don't remember that at all. No, that's amazing. I was quite proud of my achievement, because one of the other innocuous questions that I was going to add on my list today was, are you handy? Because generally I'm not handy at all, at least not what I would define as handy, which is kind of D.I.Y, putting stuff up and things like that. I'm terrible at all those things. So I was quite proud of myself actually, for taking it down and not injuring myself or getting anything wrong in the process. So, yeah.

Simon Blake

I am full of admiration, I have to say. I had to take YouTube out the other day to find out where to put the cool freeze, whatever you put in a car...

Phil Willcox

Yeah, the anti-freeze thing, yeah.

Simon Blake

Cool freeze, whatever it is, and then I thought, oh, while I'm here, I'll just have a look and see where you refill the windscreen wipers as well. So I've done that a few times since then. But, yeah, no, I am super appalling at anything and actually have no desire either I have to say. It's that sort of thing, if I wanted to do it, I'm sure I could. I don't think it's beyond my abilities, but I have no desire. No desire whatsoever. I think if other people enjoy it, I should let them have the pleasure.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, absolutely. And I'll take that link then, I'll take that segue In terms of the enjoyment of work, I think I also agree with you, is really important. So there's certain things that I'm really good at, and there's things that I'm not, and I'd rather enlist the support of somebody who enjoys and is good at that thing that needs doing, rather than forcing myself to try and do it. And I think one of the things that really struck me or stuck with me, I think, I mentioned when we spoke off air, was your belief about how work has the power to be great for people and their health. And similarly, I think the people in work then also hold a great deal of power to make things happen. And I'm conscious that's my summary. So is there something in there that I've, sort of, misunderstood or misrepresented, would you say?

Simon Blake

No, I think that's a really good summary. And I really believe that it's so important that we think about work as something that can be designed in a way which is good for us and is health promoting. And I would put it, I guess, into three buckets, one is how do we support the wellbeing of everybody? How do we make sure that people get support when they need it? We will all go through periods which may be about mental health, it may be about physical health, it may be about life circumstances, where we might need additional support or flexibility or adjustment. And then there is, how do we make sure that work is designed in a way which everybody, somebody with a serious mental illness, enduring mental illness can thrive and be able to work well? And for me, I guess that sense of wellbeing and productivity fuel one another. So often we talk about getting the balance right, and I subscribe to a view that it's about really ensuring that they are fuelling one another, that wellbeing is the Bunsen burner under productivity, and productivity is a Bunsen burner under wellbeing as well.

Phil Willcox

How do they feed each other then? So thinking about that description of how they need to feed each other and inform each other, how for you, do they do that?

Simon Blake

So what we know about work, or what I think I know about work, is that what powers us at work is a sense of connection to the purpose. It's about the people that we're connected with. It's about the line manager, it's about a belief in what we are doing. So if we create the conditions in which we've got the tools, we've got the frameworks, we've got the time, we've got the ability, we've got the

support around us, then that's exciting. Some of the best things that have been done in my working life have been ultimately reasonably challenging. They've stretched me. They've given me some bumps and lumps along the way, but that sense of achievement has really given a sense of purpose, of confidence, of ability to make a difference, which in itself then says, okay, I can do that. And taking that out into our personal lives or doing things that we've done in our personal lives, you've done a demolition, if you can do a demolition, what can you do at work? What can you do outside of work? What are those unknown abilities which you've had, or those undiscovered talents or things that we might enjoy? So work can be tough, and I don't want to underplay that, and it can be tough for all sorts of reasons, but it can also be a playground in which we get to explore and develop, and grow, and meet new people, and be challenged, and have great ideas, and see those ideas through to fruition. And that applies wherever you are. One of my first ever jobs was making burgers around agricultural shows when. When I was growing up. And Budge, who was the person who owned the stand, was always saying, how can we make it better? How can we get the line, that was quite long, quicker? How can we make sure that we're not wasting spaces? And was really believing in and pushing us, as all relatively young teenagers, fresh into the workspace, and would do the debriefs, and would help us to think about what we might want to do the next day. And those sorts of experiences have helped shape me. And those experiences have been in a range of different jobs. When I worked at Gap, the manager, John, would just talk about what we were doing, how we were doing it, the way that we would help each other, and various managers and colleagues right the way through my career have done that. And that creates great sense of joy, belief, purpose. And that fuels wellbeing.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, absolutely. I worked in Greggs the bakers first, and I was 15, I think, I was there from 15 till 17, I think. And then it was when I went to McDonald's that I felt that connection to other people for the first time, I think because the bakers was always quite small, so there was only two, three, four people in a store, maybe five or six on a Saturday, if it was really busy. But when I was in McDonald's, you could have 8/10 people in the kitchen, plus another 12/15 on front counter, plus 5 on lobby. So you had a team of 30 people, I suppose, in a way, trying to deliver a service to the customer that was coming in. And that sense of connection with each other. We had a connection to a goal or a purpose, I suppose, in terms of trying to achieve some targets. So I remember one shift when we cooked enough food for the store to take £2000 of revenue in an hour. I'm not sure when this would have been, it would have been 1997 maybe. I think a Big Mac meal at that point was £2.88, so we'd had to have sold a lot of Big Mac meals to make our two grand in an hour. But I remember the whooping and the hollering, and the sense of achievement that we had when we'd done that, to find out that we'd done that £2000 hour. Because I think the hour before we did like £1850 or something, we were close, but weren't there. And then I remember we all doubled down and really went for it in the second hour. It created another shift point in my life, but that's a different story, but, yeah, I remember that feeling of connection to my colleagues, to the team that were around me, to a goal that we were trying to achieve. And it was hard. And I was probably a bit smelly by the end of that shift, to be fair, but, yeah, it was good work. It was hard work, but it was rewarding work. So, yeah.

Simon Blake

Interesting. And I just, as you talked about Greggs, I've just got a new bank account where you get a Greggs treat every week. And I'm on a diet, so going back to the horses, I have to keep my weight down to a certain level because I still compete, and I'm now over 50, so it's getting harder to do so. And so this Gregg treat sits treat sits on my phone every week and I try to walk past. A new form of horror.

Phil Willcox

Yeah. I still struggle to resist a steak bake. I do love a steak bake, they're one of my favourite things that Greggs does. So in both of your examples there, where you think about Gap and did you say it was Bunce?

Simon Blake

Budge, that's the burger man.

Phil Willcox

Sorry, Budge the burger man. So we think about Budge and the manager at Gap then, in this harnessing of the power that work has to be good for people and their health, whether it be physical or mental health, I suppose part of me wonders, is there a risk of overplaying the role of the manager in that or is actually the manager really crucial and fundamental to that harnessing of that power, that work can be great for people and their health?

Simon Blake

I definitely don't think you can overplay the importance of the manager. I think what we mustn't do is ignore the importance of peers. So often we talk about leadership and management, I think we less often talk about the importance of peers. But sticking to managers, what the Chartered Management Institute does tell us is that most managers have not been trained to be a manager by the time they get to a management position. So I think it's about 88% of people become a manager by accident, and I'm certainly one of those people. And if we really, so often people become managers, I think, because it's a route to progression when there are less other routes to progression. But actually, some people probably shouldn't be managers because you may not have the skills, or the time, or the patience, or the desire to be a good people manager. And for me, if you're going to be a good manager, you've got to have the time, you've got to have the skills, but you also have to want to know the people in your team. To know enough about people, to understand them, to be able to know when they are feeling well and doing well, and to be able to feed that back, and know when something may not be quite right. And how do you lean into that conversation as well. But what the research also tells us is that people will often join an organisation but leave a manager. And so your question about do we overplay that? No, I don't think we can overplay it. But how do we make sure that managers can do the job well? Well, firstly, to make sure that it is seen as about being in a relationship with a person and trying to help them to do their best, and making sure that enough time and attention is spent deliberately to enable us to do that.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, definitely. So one of the research papers that we published, I think it was back in 2023, was

called Managers feel the Pinch. So we did some research into emotion expression. So the extent to which people felt they could express how they feel across a range of emotions, whether that be pleasure, overwhelm or frustration, and we correlated that with some wellbeing outcomes in terms of pleasure that people find in their work, the extent to which work kept them awake at night and the extent to which they felt stressed in the last four weeks? And what we find was that managers in particular, yeah, the title of the paper I guess, gave it away, in terms of they seem to be feeling that pinch, in terms of I can't necessarily express my emotions upwards to senior management or leadership because I'm concerned about my credibility and how that will come across. And similarly, I can't express it down to my team, because I'm worried that I might come across as putting stuff on them or coming across as weak, and that I can't cope. And we didn't talk about peers in that research actually, which is something that I'm now reflecting and thinking, well, maybe we need to do that. And I was really interested in that point that you were making. I know you moved away from it because of my question, and if it's okay, I'd like to bring us back to it, if that's all right? Because I think they're an often overlooked group, as you said really, so what for you might be the role that peers can have in this element of helping work or harnessing the power of work to be great for people and their health?

Simon Blake

So we are social beings. The world of work has changed enormously, hasn't it, over the last four years. And one of the things that worries me most about that, particularly for younger people, is the move away from being in an office and the move to being at home, I think removes that opportunity to make great friends, to build relationships with people in work, who you can just lean over and say, could you read this for me and give me a little bit of input? Or to hear and learn from one another. If I look back and think about my work in my twenties and thirties, what I remember is the great people. If you push me a little bit harder, I might remember some of the projects and the things that I worked on. But mostly it will be the fun times with people, the camaraderie, the moments that we won a funding bid and we whooped together like you did with the two grand an hour, and all of those sorts of things. So that ability to work as part of a team, the ability to learn, develop, bounce ideas off people is magic really. And whether going and doing things outside of work, the social element of work also feels really important. So when I talk about work designed wellbeing good for us, I'm not necessarily talking about turning on the computer in my kitchen, as I've done now, I'm talking about that whole experience of leaving the house, seeing people. I've got a great commute from London Bridge, walk across Tower Bridge, and it's a really nice bit of the south bank to walk along. Seeing people in the office, hearing people laugh, having those accidental moments where you do something, or you help somebody and doing the work, it's all part for me of that bigger picture. And I sometimes could be in danger of saying the office space was utopia and sounding as though that I want to go back to those heady days. And I recognise that there are all sorts of benefits which people experience of this new way of working, but that power of people and friendship development, and learning and growing. I remember listening to people answering a call and talking about something and thinking I'm going to use those words, that's brilliant. And I still use some of those words and phrases, and ways of addressing things now. And the manager in that is an important role, but if I've got a letter and I've drafted it, or a document and I send it to my manager, I would often be sending it for approval, rather than for comment. Whereas if you send it to a peer and you're asking them for their ideas and their input, not for approval per se. So there's different

power dynamics and different roles and responsibilities, and maybe it's okay for them not to be named. But when we talk about culture, what's the phrase that people use? Culture is the worst, but your culture is defined by the worst behaviour you're willing to accept. And that's everybody's behaviour. Everybody contributes to caring and supporting. At MHFA England we have a platform called Bonusly, which is a recognition platform. And what's so nice about that is seeing the care and energy, and collaboration, and attention that people are giving each other. And it's much more powerful than just manager to their line reports. It's really about that cross organisation, fertilisation, power of the different skills that we have.

Phil Willcox

And so for those workplaces then that might be more hybrid or remote, I guess what I'm hearing in what you're describing is then the need for them to be maybe more deliberate and purposeful in the design of maybe some of the interaction points. I am hesitant to use the word touch points because that sounds very bullshit bingo-y. To think about those occasions where people may connect, interact and so on, and almost thinking carefully about how they design that to allow those connection elements or those connections to happen.

Simon Blake

Absolutely. And I think so many people and organisations are trying really hard to do that now. So the days when everybody might be in the office or the team days, or making sure it's not all going to the office, take your computer, sit down and do Teams meetings all day. What is the value of being all together? How do you organize the things that you need to do together? Whether it's the full team get together, the team get together, the development sessions, so that there's much more of that element of getting to know each other. We know that when you know each other, you're more likely to get along with people. You're more likely to be able to interact, to engage, to ask for help, to give support, to spot when things are going brilliantly, to spot when they're not going so well. So really, really important in a flexible working context to be constantly thinking. And I suspect we're going to have to experiment for a few more years yet until we find ways that truly do it. And just to make the link back to management again, I guess there is a question for me, which is, if we are going to continue working as we are, which there's no going back, there is only going forward, how are we going to support, develop, train the next managers of the future, the next leaders of the future, so that those things which used to happen by accident or by perhaps design, but loose design, because we were so used to it, where people shadow, learn, overhear, et cetera, be mentored by, build relationships and learn, how do we get that into this new world?

Phil Willcox

Yeah. Especially when you have, I guess, maybe differing expectations or differing experiences in terms of what the makeup of the workforce. I'm not a big fan of generation or generalisations, if that makes sense, because I just think they might be a bit heavily reductionist and a bit simplistic. Because I think even, I say even, that's probably clumsy language, let me try again, in my experience, some people I know that are aged between say 38 and 50, who you might put in a particular generational gap, their expectations and wants off of the workplace are also changing. So I think it's how workplaces prepare the people, the processes and the places of work for that, for those change



in expectations and change in dynamics, or change in wants or change in opportunities, I think is really important. So, as you said, the role of the manager in that can be really crucial.

Simon Blake

I think that's right. We need to be 100% mindful, yeah, I completely agree with you about generalisations, because I think we all had an experience of things being different through COVID. So my mum became terminally ill during COVID and I was able to go and work, and live with her, and work right the way through the end of her life, which I would never have been able to do had we not been in lockdown at that time. And the expectations therefore of work are different. But what that's given me is a sense that if that were to happen again to my dad, I would want to be with my dad throughout his final months. And I would also want to continue working because that would be... now I may not be able to in the world that we're in now, but I was able to during COVID. So it sets up a different dynamic, And people all have had their own experiences, whether that's being at home, living at home so that they save more money. We know that getting mortgages and rent, and all those sorts of things are different. So people might have more disposable allowance or living outside of London because it's cheaper to do so in some aspects of living. Whatever things people experienced, it's just meant that we've gone work can be different, it doesn't have to take up so much of life. How do we make sure we can create a balanced life which work fits in? And that's happened to everybody across the generations.

Phil Willcox

Yeah. Also, I'm sorry to hear that your mum passed away, I'm sorry.

Simon Blake

It's sad and I miss her enormously, but it's the circle of life, isn't it? It's one thing that we can all guarantee is going to happen at some point. And we were really privileged, we found out in the August, I went for two days thinking that I'd be coming home again, and I was there for nine months in the end, because dad fell over and broke his femur a week before mum died, so I had to look after him for a few months afterwards. But we got the chance to say all the things that you often don't get to say, to make sure they had some things which needed to be locked into future thinking, and sad, very sad, but also a real privilege in the experience of it.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, I think I was conscious that I didn't want to let it pass without offering my condolences. So, yeah, thank you. Okay, so where that takes my thinking then is into what I think might be for some an underrated or underestimated attribute, which is about being considered or considerate. And so when we think about the design of work and so on, thinking about what that could mean, what could the impact be, how could that work for different people? So I guess for me anyway, being considerate or considering others is going to be really important. And so when we think, and I guess I'm putting myself in the listener's shoes now then in terms of thinking, well, what are some of the things that maybe either the workplace leaders or people, professionals maybe, who might be

listening to this podcast, what might be some of the things that they need to consider, do you think, when it comes to people's health and/or mental health in the workplace, do you think?

Simon Blake

So the key bit in all of this, Phil, it seems to me, is really how do we create workplaces in which we are kind but straight talking, that we are clear about what needs to be delivered and about the objectives and how things happen, and recognise that interpersonal relationships will also always be at play? And then how do we make sure that enough time and attention is paid to the group dynamics, the team dynamics, what is going on within our organisations? What's going on within different teams? We know that there will often be different expectations of different teams within a single organisation, and there might be different types of personalities in some rather than others, and how do you pay attention to those and recognise that those dynamics will always exist in within every single organisation? And goes right back again to the issue about peers. We don't all have to like each other in a way which means that we have to spend the bank holiday weekend together. But we do have to be professional and engaging with different people who may not be like us, who have different ideas and find ways to do that well. And so often we talk about conflict at work, when actually, a lot of the time, what we're talking about is people having different ideas and different opinions, and needing to work out which ones are the best ones for that particular outcome. And I think language has so much power within it to help people to either deliver well and work well, or to feel as though things are difficult, challenging and not easy to operate within. So for me, there's something about all workplaces really taking enough time and energy, and thinking to work out what is it that is expected within their workplace, and how do people know about those expectations? And how do people get rewarded when they live up to those expectations? And enabled to learn or where necessary, there are sanctions where people are crossing a line within that. And it's often so much easier to address performance related to an objective, rather than performance related to behaviour. And I'm sure that there are lots of people within that, that are listening who have been in organisations where somebody's perceived to be a high performer, even though they might be leaving all sorts of people in their wake. And for me, that isn't high performance, that's being able to get a job done, but without considering others along the way. And I think we have to get better at being able to be clear about the values and behaviours that we expect from people, as well as what we want in terms of output or outcome.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, definitely. Have you read Kim Scott's book Radical Candor? That sounds like some Kim Scott Radical Candor language in there. Yeah, yeah.

Simon Blake

I was looking at that book just this afternoon.

Phil Willcox

All right. Okay. There you go. Okay. All right. So when I think about my wellbeing, my mental health wellbeing wise, and I think about the workplace, and I'm not going to include my own, or I'm saying

that because it's mine, so maybe I feel like that's harder for me to do in terms of my wellbeing within the company that I now run. When I think back to my employed roles or employed roles in my career then, the things that really helped me love my work weren't the things that were there to support my wellbeing. If that makes sense? It wasn't the employee assistance programme. It wasn't the journaling app. It wasn't the mindfulness sessions, although they weren't called that then that I could go and attend to. And that might sound like I'm maybe belittling or dismissing these things, and that's not what I'm trying to do, what I am advocating for, I guess, is saying that it was the connections and the relationships that I held with my colleagues and/or my customers, and/or the people I was working with or the residents that I was supporting when I was working for a local council. And I guess, I suppose when I think about some of the narrative that I hear around the workplace and workplace wellbeing, and workplace mental health, a lot of the focus I hear is on the employer to put in place solutions, additional solutions and support, which I think are important and have a place. So again, I'm being clear I'm not trying to diminish or dismiss them. And I don't know, sometimes I feel like that might be an easy out, rather than addressing some of the maybe more systemic or cultural aspects of what you were describing recently in terms of the high performer with people left in their wake. So again, I run the risk of maybe sounding like I'm asking you to repeat yourself, and I suppose I just want to see if there's something else you'd like to build on from that. Yeah, what are your thoughts on maybe those systemic elements of work and their link to wellbeing and mental health, as opposed to maybe those solutions or those additional support mechanisms that might be put into place?

Simon Blake

I think you're absolutely right, Phil. I believe wholeheartedly that we have to have employee assistance programmes. Mental health first aiders, mental health champions, the Mindfulness app or Headspace, whatever it is. I think they're really, really important elements. But ultimately, those are mostly the cherries, or they are for those who don't get that, the cherries on the cake. They are not the cake. The cake has to be the work itself. The way that we design that, making sure there's enough time in our day, making sure that people feel that they can disconnect, making sure that we're not sat doing emails all the time and always on the end of a phone, believing that we can't switch off when we go on holiday or when we're across the weekends, getting that moment to celebrate, to be part of teams that are going to cheerlead you all of the way, fair remuneration for the work and effort that is put in. And when we can get all of that right, we also put that alongside all of the other bits. And sometimes you get people arguing, saying, well, the EAP only gets 5% take-up or whatever. It's really important for that 5%. I've never used an EAP in my life, but I'm really grateful to know that it exists in case I need it. And that is true for, I think, so many different elements that we only know when something is there, when we need it often. And so what we mustn't do is say, if it hasn't got 50% take-up, it's not needed. It's needed by the people who are using it. And through COVID we used to do some physical exercise classes, so we had some people come in once a week. It didn't have huge take-up, somewhere between 5% and 10% of the workforce, but for that 5% to 10%, it was a really important lifeline in that moment where people were feeling isolated and feeling lonely. So I think it's about the quality of the impact that we need to be focusing on when it comes to that support and those things outside, not how many people use it, but how important is it for the people who use it and making sure that we're really focused around that.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, okay. Can I ask a bit of a broader question? So what inspired you to advocate in this area, if that's not too big a question?

Simon Blake

No, it's a good question. I was supposed to be an educational psychologist. That was my plan. And I packed my case and went to Cardiff University 32, 33 years ago. And I did the undergrad, was due to sign up to do the masters, and fell in love, did a little bit of travelling. It all went wrong. I came back, tail between my legs, and ended up working in a bar and missed the deadlines, and then got a job running a sex education project for young men in the South Wales Valley. That was really the start of an adventure that has continued for the last 30 years. And all of that has then been in the social sector. And so I worked for voluntary community, social enterprise, and I worked for 20 odd years in sex education, sexual health, with some drug education, volatile substance abuse health, wellbeing, mental health within it. And then I worked at the National Union of Students for a three and a half year stint until I got this job at MHFA England. And I think all of my career, until this point, had led me to the fact that our mental health is an asset. It's an asset which we need to understand more about. We need to understand how we can look after ourselves and each other. And they often talk about us looking after our brain, so our brain can look after us. And some of those things about understanding enough about the neuroscience. Why do we need to sleep? Why do we need physical exercise? Why do we need disconnection and time to decompress? And all of those sorts of things. And so when the job at MHFA England came up, it was actually, this brings together so much of what I've learnt before, which is our mental health is about us as humans. It is about who we are, what we believe, what drives us, and how we can manage the everyday realities of being alive, whether we've got a diagnosed mental illness or not? So that's one bit. But what has also happened since I've been at MHFA England is, I thought, much more about work. Yeah, I've mostly been lucky in my 30 years, in that I've mostly had jobs that I've enjoyed, with people I've enjoyed working, with managers who I've mostly got on with. But when I haven't had people around me who you have cheer-led and I've cheer-led them, and we've supported one another, and when I haven't had a good manager, life has been a bit miserable. And that's not just in the time between starting work in the morning and finishing at night, it actually extends into the personal life. And then you have a few more arguments with the partner, and then that feeds in, and then work feels a bit worse the next day. So there's something for me which is about the quality of work and the experiences that we have at work and our mental health, are really important for all of our lives. And things like talking about emotions at work. It's so easy for people to think of work as transaction. Work is us. It is a part of us. One of the first things that people do, rightly or wrongly, is say, where do you work? What do you do? And I know when I've not been working that when someone says, who are you? I'm like, I don't know. And so for me, it's really, really important that we recognise the importance of work, the power of work, the choices that we have in relation to it and what it does for our emotional wellbeing and our mental wellbeing in the context of work as well.

Phil Willcox

Yeah. I think the importance of just expressing how we feel in a constructive way. So I'm a big fan of Brene Brown and her work. I know when Brene Brown describes vulnerability, she makes a

distinction to say that it's not vulnerability without censorship. So it's not vulnerability without consideration for others. And I'm inspired by that when I think about the expression of emotion. So that's something I advocate for a lot, is getting to the creating organisations or teams or cultures in companies where everyone can say what they think and feel without fear of reprisal or censorship, and with consideration for those that are around them, and consideration of the context, and considering those different aspects. Because if there is no ability to express, then it can build up and build up to what I would describe or emotion researchers would describe as a flooding out episode, where you then get the emotion flooding out of somebody, which could be through frustration, which may manifest itself in behaviour of shouting, or walking out, or slamming a door, or hitting a table. It may come out in terms of overwhelm, in terms of sadness, in terms of tears and upset, and crying. And so for me, if we can get in early, before we get to that flooding out episode, where that first moment where the member of the team can say to their manager, I feel like you've let me down because you've not backed me, I'd made a recommendation, I'd made this decision, someone complained about it, and then you just undid it. And I feel let down by that because you didn't back me, and you didn't support me, or you didn't bring me on the journey to why you undid the decision that I made. And I just feel a bit let down by that, and I'd like to speak about that some more. Because if we can't have that discussion, then that emotion will just sit there. I say it will sit there. So if the individual does a lot of self-reflection and a lot of self-work, and has their own reflective practice and emotion regulation strategies, then it might be that they can deal with that feeling that's there. But otherwise, I think what happens is we, kind of, push it back down and then it comes back up, and then we push it down, and it comes back up, push it down, comes back up, and then out it comes, as it were. If we can be expressing what we think and what we feel on a much more regular basis in a constructive way, then I think that just makes for much better workplaces all round really.

Simon Blake

Yeah, I would absolutely agree with that. I guess the one thing that I think we have to be really interested and mindful about is that some people have the power and privilege to express their emotions more freely in work and society, and others, than other people do. And when you look at racism in the context of work, and how emotion is monitored and understood, and interpreted, those structural inequalities that exist have to be understood in order to create that truly, what I describe as a liberated workplace, in which you can have those conversations. And also recognise that for some people, having that conversation will be really important. And for other people, actually just pushing on through isn't about sweeping under the carpet, it's about a coping strategy. And I know, for example, that I have no worries about having a disagreement or giving feedback at a point at which I need to. But in the context of work, certainly in my twenties, thirties and forties, I would often think, is this worth a conversation? What happens? And particularly as it got more senior, what happens if you have this conversation? Does the issue become bigger than it might be? And I always remember when I first started going out with my husband, one of the first arguments we had, he said, are we going to finish over this? And I said, well, no. And he said, well, is it worth the argument then? And that really stuck in my brain that sometimes it is. It's worth the conversation. It's worth the discussion. But other times when we've said something, there is sometimes a greater meaning attached to it by the other person than is actually meant from it. So I think there's a really interesting balance, and I love having the conversation about what we believe

it's worth talking about and what we don't. Because so often we have completely different expectations about by having a conversation, how much importance is placed on it.

Phil Willcox

Yeah. And from your experiences, then, whether that be, I guess, personally in that example or professionally, what, if any, or if there were some suggestions or recommendations that you might have for the listener, what might they be?

Simon Blake

Recommendations? Is there any parameter on it or can I give any recommendations?

Phil Willcox

Yes, we can broaden it out, we can definitely broaden it out shortly. I suppose in what I was thinking of building on that element that we were just exploring around the meaning or the weight of the meaning that the hearer may place on something, versus the weight of the meaning that the speaker may have on it. So I may speak something which I may feel has a light weight to it, whereas it might be heard with a heavy weight and/or I guess, are we going to over this? No. Therefore, is it worth it? So I suppose it was that bit in particular I suppose I was thinking of, in terms of the recommendations, because how do you judge the weightiness and/or when do you decide? And I guess maybe my question is too big because an appropriate answer might be, well, I can't say that, Phil, because all conversations are different and so on. But, yeah, I guess, I felt like it was a conversation, a question I wanted to ask.

Simon Blake

Yeah, I'm happy to answer it. I think I just wanted to check I understood what it is. So that's really helpful.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, no, absolutely.

Simon Blake

So the key thing for me would be just really make sure that we think about it and know why we want it. Is there something that we want to change? Is there something that we want to learn? Is there something that, that person needs to know in order to move things forward and make sure that what we are not doing is just saying something and not thinking about how it might be received and about the impact., I think we've mentioned it earlier, the difference between being nice, in which we may not say anything at all for fear of offending, and being kind, which might be saying it, but with thoughtfulness and with due care and with clarity about what might need to be done differently. And one of the things that none of us will ever know is about why people behave in the way that they do in a particular situation and what it is about the situation, the circumstance, the conversation, which is creating a response that we don't know. So that bit you often see be kind, but

everyone's fighting their own battles or whatever it is. And I think that whole notion about understanding that what you see and hear, may not be the be all and end all, that there may be lots of things going on under the surface that we've interpreted through our frame of reference rather than through theirs, and then seeking clarification. So that thoughtfulness going, this just happened and the impact that it had on me was this, can I just check before assuming the challenge, I think, is where I would just come from in relation to that.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, I agree. And so there are so two or three phrases that I use and I advocate for use. One of those is building on theme that humans are meaning making machines. So we see things, we hear things, we interpret things, we experience things, and then we make them mean something. So, one thing I'll use both with, both personally and professionally, is I'll say, so I'm making what you just said mean that, and then insert my interpretation. And is my meaning what you meant? Because if I'm making it mean something different to what you meant, then I want to understand that. So I'm making that mean that you think that I'm not listening to you, that I'm overruling you and that I'm a bad boss. Is that what you mean? Because that's what I'm making it mean, and I don't know if that's true or not, so let's get in and explore that. So one of that is I'm making that mean, that's one of my favourite kind of openings. A second one is, so what I'm hearing then is, and then give my summary of what I'm hearing. Is that correct? Is that accurate? Is there something I've missed or misrepresented or misinterpreted? And then the third again, is a Brene inspired one, which is the story I'm telling myself now then is... So having heard that the story I'm telling myself now is, insert summary of the story, again, is that right? Is that correct? And I find those three frames in that process really beneficial for me from an emotion regulation or emotion management perspective, because it means that I have some time to think about my response before I just come back in with it. So if I've heard something that I might find difficult or the individual might find difficult to say, by clarifying the meaning or the intent or the story or whatever it would be, it buys me time to consider my response, buys me time to regulate my emotions a little bit as well. And it also pays reference and respect to the other individual to say, I want to make sure I understand you clearly. I want to make sure that we're of the same understanding in terms of what you intended it to mean versus what I've heard, because speaker intent and hear a meaning can be two very different things. And I think it also helps that individual as well, because what they're not getting is what might be a stereotypical, immediate response or reaction from me, what they're getting is a more considered response in that way, I suppose.

Simon Blake

Yeah, I think that's really powerful, Phil. And the interesting bit, of course, is what I've heard can be quite cognitive. The story I'm telling myself is a really generous gift that you're giving somebody, because it often plays into some of our biggest vulnerabilities, if you're willing to say you said that, and the meaning that I have taken from it, and the story I'm now telling myself is this, this and this, can be opening yourself up, which is where we feel safe to do. So how powerful is that? And, yeah, nice, thank you, I've taken something away from this podcast just in that last two minutes of those three little phrases.



Phil Willcox

Okay. In which case, you're welcome. And thank you, because I don't think we'd have got there if it wasn't for you. So that's really good. All right, so as we start to move then, I guess, in towards the final section of the podcast, I feel like we've covered a lot of ground from thinking about how do we design work in a way that is beneficial for people's health? We've spoken about the importance of connection, of purpose, of connecting with each other. We've talked about how the importance of the manager and how managers 88%, I think it was you said, from the Charter Management Institute piece of research in terms of they find themselves into the way of a manager. We've talked about potential conflicts, we've talked about the importance of peers. I suppose we've covered a whole range of areas, which is fantastic because that's what we said we wanted to do at the start, which is have a really great conversation. And maybe I'm being overly simplistic or overly reductionist, and I think I'll go ahead and try and do that anyway in terms of asking, before we move into the final phase, because we talked about considering and being considerate a lot, so what might be some final considerations you would give for the listener to think about in terms of whether it be workplace health, mental health, what might be some of the final considerations you would give?

Simon Blake

I think we've talked a lot about the organisation and about leaders and managers, and peers in the context of the organisation. And I would really like to remind us that even when we may not feel like we've got choices, we all have choices and we all have power and accountability. Not always all at the same time, not always able to act on choices, and there will always be things which impact on them, but making sure that we have our agency, and that we take accountability for the choices and decisions that we do make about both what we do, how we do it and who we do it with. And sometimes I worry that we underestimate how much choice we have, how much power we have, both in terms of a mindset of where we are, but also in where we want to be and how we want to get there. And I remember one particular job where I was really, really miserable, and I was so miserable that I didn't have the energy to find another job, and I needed to have a break, but I also didn't have enough money to be able to say, I'm handing in my notice. And in the end I did hand in my notice without having another job. And immediately having done so, I found the energy to look for another job and to then find another job. It was a really important lesson, which sometimes when you're at a low ebb, that having the energy which you need to make the change is really difficult. But just making a small change, can create a different energy flow to enable us to do some things differently. And in a world where we can feel like everything happens quickly and in a way that is about others doing things to us, taking that power and accountability is really, I want to say, powerful again, and it is powerful, but special, it's important.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, definitely. Okay. All right.

AD



So as we move into the final kind of closing sections then, Simon has wonderfully outlined the case for shift in the discourse on mental health at work. And as you know, we are passionate about shifting the discourse around emotions at work. The link between constructively engaging with all our emotions on a moment to moment basis massively improves mental health and wellbeing in the workplace. So if your workplace will be willing to engage with analysis, then we'll work with you to shape the advice and application that you need to create a team or a workplace which harnesses all emotion for the good of colleagues. Don't know where to start? I do. Contact us now on [hello@emotionatwork.co.uk](mailto:hello@emotionatwork.co.uk) And now back to the show.

Phil Willcox

When you look back now, what has surprised you about your, I guess, maybe your experience with wellbeing and mental health in the workplace?

Simon Blake

Lots of surprises, lots of them. Very good. The passion, the energy, the commitment, the willingness, the desire to eradicate stigma to create workplaces is enormous. And I think that's really, really powerful. And yeah, that's reflected in the work that people do, the training they provide, putting in EAPs, mental health first aiders, doing speakers, having leaders talk about their own experience. We see so much that is very, very different than it was 15 to 20 years ago. And that's incredible. I think that the surprise, which is one which we will be able to navigate through, into the next phase, because of course, if you've had an issue which people don't feel comfortable talking about, is going to be more difficult, you're not going to move to a perfect place. But it feels as though we are using the same words to describe such different experiences, from wellbeing for everybody, through to trying to make sure that the most vulnerable or people with real challenges within the context are getting the support that they need. And somehow we've got to develop more nuance in relation to it. And then perhaps that there is still a slight desire for the new, the shiny and the silver bullet. And in my view, there is never going to be a silver bullet, that we've got to get the basics right, which is mostly about human connection and human relationship, and ability to have good quality conversation and to spot signs and symptoms. And then finally, an unintended consequence, I think, of this brilliant, brilliant focus on mental health is that it feels as though it can be difficult to talk about joy and pleasure, and the importance of good quality work, and that the public narrative is much more about managing stress and about the challenges of work. And to be really, really, really crystal clear, I think that it is really, really, really important to talk about stress and the challenges of work and to really focus on that. And at the same time, to be really clear that work designed well is good for us, and that we should be talking about that as much as we do, so that we can really make sure that there is a belief that work will be good for us. So there's a belief that work is positive and can be positive, and not in a toxic positivity way.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, definitely. Okay. All right, so last few questions then as we come to an end. Are there particular books or videos or TED talks or things like that you might recommend for people that you

think if they're interested in some of the areas that we've explored and discussed, that if they wanted to find out more or have some wider reading or inspiration, what might that be?

Simon Blake

So, Find Your Why, Simon Sinek is one which I think is just a really, really good book. I've also brought in Pleasure Activism, The Politics of Feeling Good, just to the last point that I talking about things. I think this is a really important thing for us all to think about. What does feeling good and joy mean in a political context as well as a human context? I tend not to listen to business podcasts, but I do listen to an awful lot of story type podcasts and Desert Island Discs, I think is from a work and inspiration, and learning perspective, the archive is just quite incredible in terms of the stories of people. And similarly, autobiographies and people's lives would be where I take learning. I'm much better at hearing a story and working out what it means for me, than I am reading a business book. I mean, I've tried my best. I have a pile of all of the books, but have I ever read them? Not in a way that some people would call reading. I've skimmed them, I've underlined bits, and I've taken bits of inspiration. And you talked about, TED talks. I think the most interesting thing about this is just having a dive in and you know within two or three minutes whether it's going to be of interest to you. And so I do like, when I go to the gym, I do like moving around and trying to find a way to find things that are interesting, and TED Talks would be a place. Desert Island Discs would be a place. And just started listening to David Badiel and Baroness Warzi's podcast, A Muslim & a Jew. But those sorts of podcasts or I can tell you the myriad of podcasts I listen to about eventing and horse riding, but you probably don't want those in the context of this particular podcast.

Phil Willcox

Okay, wonderful, thank you. And I'm sure they're great for your wellbeing and your mental health as well, so that's good. If people wanted to get hold of you and they wanted to ask you something more, how would you like people to get hold of you?

Simon Blake

So I'm on LinkedIn under Simon Blake, Mental Health First Aid England. That's probably the easiest way to get hold of me. If people want to find out about Mental Health First Aid England, our website is [mhfaengland.org](http://mhfaengland.org). And similarly, we've got a LinkedIn page, which has got information and resources and all sorts of things on that page. And similarly on Instagram and on Facebook, it's all Mental Health First Aid, then you'll find us through those.

Phil Willcox

Wonderful. And we'll put links to all of those channels in the show notes as well. All right, then. So our final question, is there something else then, Simon, something else, something more that you're thinking, feeling, or would like to say before we come to a close?

Simon Blake

I would like to say thank you. How brilliant is it that we are now living in a world where people are talking about emotions at work. We are not thinking of ourselves as robots, but as humans that go

into work and work with other people, and, yeah, that these conversations hopefully trigger ripples, create ripples into other bits. And the people listening, hopefully, you will take something. We've said, something in a 32nd snippet or a couple of minutes, which will cause to pause and think or provoke or disagree with us. But either way, that it means the conversation keeps on moving, improving, and that we recognise that if we can be truly human at work, then we will deliver the best that we possibly can. It will be rewarding for us and brilliant for business too.

Phil Willcox

Well, look at that, I don't think I could end it any better. All right, then. Thank you so much, Simon. Thank you, you've been an amazing guest. And thank you to you and to you our wonderful listeners. Thank you, fair listener. And I'll say to everyone listening and to you, Simon, listen well to yourself, and if you can, listen well to someone else, too. Thanks for listening.