



Episode 87

Emotion at Work in Emotional Mastery – A Key Leadership Superpower

Phil Willcox

Hello and welcome to the Emotion at Work podcast, where we place emotion where it belongs, at the heart of the people, the processes and the place of work where we create environments where people feel safe, where they feel confident, and when they feel optimistic. Now, today we are looking at the internal game of leadership, and our guest is on a mission to help leaders understand that practical strategies and frameworks, although important, they're not enough if you aspire to be exceptional. Our guest advocates for emotional mastery as a key superpower of exceptional leaders in the workplace and says that mastering your internal world to change the game. So it's a pleasure to welcome to the Emotion at Work podcast, Sara Sabin. Hi, Sara.

Sara Sabin

Hi, Phil. Thank you for having me today.

Phil Willcox

Oh, thank you so much for coming on. So when I did the intro, I had like a smile on my face, which the listener could probably hear. And that's because I'd sort of 15 seconds before I'd begun the intro and realised I had not hit the record button, which brought a risk that we would have spent an hour talking and not actually had anything to show for it. But thankfully we managed to catch it, so we're all good to go.

Sara Sabin

The irony is if we'd have talked for an hour without record, probably we would have said something so profound that it would have been lost to the world forever.

Phil Willcox

I know, could have been like, oh, no, the world never got to hear it. But thankfully they will. All right. Okay. So as is typical for the Emotion at Work podcast then where we're going to begin is with the unexpected yet innocuous question. And my innocuous question for today is, what's your relationship or your kind of thoughts and feelings on trees?

Sara Sabin

That is so random.

Phil Willcox

Unexpected.

Sara Sabin

Yes, it was my thoughts on trees. I love trees. Do I hug trees? No, not really. But I like being near them, walking under them. They are great when it's raining because they offer you some rain coverage and they're great in summer because they give you shade. So I have overwhelmingly positive feelings towards trees.

Phil Willcox

Nice. So I love trees for different reasons. I just love climbing trees. Even now, as a 40 something year old man, if we go out walking in woodland, if I can find a tree to climb. I just love climbing a tree. I think partly it's like, there's a risk element, I think of climbing a tree, but also I think it's the change of perspective and it's looking through kind of, I guess if it's winter, looking through the branches if it's summer, looking through the leaves and just having a really different perspective on a place where you were before because I think on the ground you have a certain perspective, but I think then when you're elevated in some way, I think it just gives you a completely different perspective on the place that you're in and yeah, I just really enjoy that. Yeah. One of my favourite things, my wife tells me off a lot for it because she's like, Phil, stop being dangerous. You're teaching the kids bad habits by like climbing trees super high. Yeah, but it's fun at the same time.

Sara Sabin

I love that because, you know, there's that expression you can't see the wood for the trees. But obviously if you climb really high up a tree, you can see the wood.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. And, and I agree with you completely as well. The, the different kind of depending on the season, the different benefits that you can get from, you know, whether it be shelter from the rain or shelter or shade from the sun. Yeah, definitely. And do you have like a particularly favourite tree?

Sara Sabin

I have to say I'm not au fait with like what different types of trees are or species or anything like that. I do remember though, from childhood, like what I used to love to do and I probably still love to do it anyway, but like the conker trees.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, horse chestnuts.

Sara Sabin

Yeah, love those. In autumn used to go around collecting the conkers and like taking them to school and it was like a whole thing. So I do love those trees because it brings back happy memories for me.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, no, I love that. And where my, where all three of my children went to primary school, there were some horse chestnut trees outside the school and then in the park that's right next to the school. So, so many times when they were younger, we would just come home with like pockets full of conkers. And then they believed the whole idea that conkers scare spiders away. So we then had like conkers on every windowsill and you know, next to every kind of crevice that there could be so that spiders wouldn't arrive or be present in the house.

Sara Sabin

Did it work? Did it keep away the spiders shape?

Phil Willcox

No, definitely not. And similarly I remember just kind of getting conkers and soaking them in vinegar or baking them in the oven. I remember because I think about it now is like with an adult head on, you know, in terms of, I used to just beg my mum to let me put conkers in the oven for a certain period of time and with like my adult head on, I'd be like, well, what a waste of money that is. I'm paying electricity to heat the oven to warm up conkers so that Phil can try and win a conker's fight at school the next day so he can get that kind of, you know, perfect kind of crust to the edge...but also, you know, anyway, so yeah, well, okay.

Sara Sabin

We have a shared love of conkers then.

Phil Willcox

There you go, There you go. And not only a shared love of conkers, a shared love of all thing emotion, I think would be fair to say as well.

Sara Sabin

Yes, indeed. I was very excited when I first talked to you, Phil, when you told me the story of why you started realising emotions were important. Love a good story.

Phil Willcox

Love a good story. Love a good story. And one of the things that's really important for you, and I mentioned it in the introduction, was this idea of emotional mastery. So I was just wondering for the listener, would you be willing to kind of define what emotional mastery is for you?

Sara Sabin

With pleasure. Because it's something that is quite often misunderstood when I talk about it because people say to me, Sara, do you mean I will never have another emotion again? Excuse me. And I will



say to you what I say to them. No, this is not about transcending all emotions. We are human and as humans we have emotions. And that also goes for people who say to me, Sara, I'm not an emotional person. I don't care if you are outwardly emotional or not. You are having emotions going on internally. So it's not pretending. Emotional mastery is not pretending you're emotionless because you don't outwardly express. It is basically an awareness of emotions and not resisting emotions, plus knowing how to deal with them in the moment and also doing that deeper work around emotional regulation so that you are in a state of emotional neutrality more of the time. And that is the optimal state for rational thinking and also for intuitive thinking as well.

Phil Willcox

There's so much in there I want to ask about. Okay, so emotional mastery isn't about transcending all emotion. It's about not resisting. It's about kind of engaging with or dealing with and then regulating those emotions that you might be experiencing on a moment to moment, day to day basis. And then the bit that you added that you sort of did at the end is about emotional neutrality. And again, I, when I first sort of heard you say those words, I was like, oh, yeah, but like emotions aren't neutral. So, so how is emotional neutrality, that optimal state for both rational and intuitive thinking and so if a listener might be thinking the same thing, like, is emotional neutrality meaning that, you know, yeah, you're not feeling something. So how is emotional neutrality that optimal state for rational and intuitive thinking?

Sara Sabin

So if you, if you are emotionally triggered, your prefrontal cortex is impaired, and when your prefrontal cortex is impaired, you are unable or have a reduced ability to be able to think rationally. So if you think about being in the workplace and going through some kind of struggle or challenge at work, the last thing you need is for your rational ability to be impaired and for your emotions to be running the show. And also if I refer to intuitive thinking as well, a lot of times when people get those kind of flashes of insight about how to solve a problem or whatever, those can often actually come from emotions. Emotion and intuition are two different things. So basically, if you are in a triggered state, both of those ways that will really help you work through a challenge, a problem, or make a decision are going to be impaired, but when we're talking about emotional neutrality, I suppose people can be like, well, it sounds kind of boring being neutral all the time. It's work to get to neutrality. And essentially it feels really weird for people, especially when they've been on, like, some kind of emotional roller coaster, which actually a lot of us are. We're high, then we're low, then we're high, and we're low. And so it continues. So I've had clients say to me, Sara, I feel at peace. At peace is something I hear a fair bit from clients doing this work, because they're like, it's weird. I don't know what to do with this, there's all these challenges going on, but, like, I'm at peace with it. I'm like, okay, great. That is what we're talking about...neutrality. We're not talking about a sort of, beige is my least favourite colour by the way.

Phil Willcox

Okay.



Sara Sabin

Another innocuous fact about me, because it's just blah and bland. Right. So we're not talking about bland. We're talking about a state of calm, essentially.

Phil Willcox

Okay and so and I don't think this is what you mean. And so therefore, I want to ask the question to be sure, to be clear. And so that state of calm isn't about, like, ambivalence and not caring. Would that be right?

Sara Sabin

Correct. Yes.

Phil Willcox

Okay.

Sara Sabin

And I also want to bring in the point that it may sound like neutrality is just about suppressing.

Phil Willcox

Right.

Sara Sabin

So it might seem like I'm saying that, I'm not saying that and I think that's the key point to get across as well.

Phil Willcox

Yeah.

Sara Sabin

Suppressing emotions is basically denying them or distracting yourself from them or resisting them. So basically you're really angry, but you're like, no, no, I'm not really angry, I shouldn't be angry etcetera and this kind of thing around toxic positivity is a problem because it is a form of suppression and you have to deal with the emotion first in order to get to neutrality. You can't kind of gloss over and be like, oh okay, great, everything's sunshine and rainbows if you are not feeling like that in the moment. So the path to neutrality is being aware and also not resisting it because when you resist it, you're adding more and more layers to the emotion. So you're feeling anxious, but then you're like, I shouldn't be feeling anxious. And then you feel shame around feeling anxious and you're like literally like blowing this thing up. So it's the awareness, acknowledgment and acceptance of the emotion and then labelling it as well reduces your emotional reactivity. And then it's about releasing or



processing of which obviously there are different ways that you could do that, but that's how you get to this place of neutrality. And obviously the more you practice that and the more you do it, the more naturally that kind of happens because you stop being afraid of emotions so much. So many of us just really scared of emotion.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, definitely. So I really like that description that you just gave. So the path is awareness, acknowledgement and acceptance of the emotion and labelling then what you're feeling and then the kind of release or the processing of whatever that emotion is, or what that feeling is in that moment. And the more you kind of tread that path, the easier that path is to find, because I agree with you completely. I think sometimes that path can be really difficult to find. So I was in a coaching session recently with a client and they were talking about how they were feeling about something that's happening within their organisation and we spent a good, I don't know, I felt like a good 45-50 minutes trying to disentangle the different elements of what they were feeling. So what they were describing was a feeling, which was sort of a feeling of pent up energy and frustration about what's happening and anxiety about what might be happening next. But for them it was about one thing. And actually when we disentangled it, what they were doing, they were bringing together and combining a number of different, what you and I would probably label as triggers. They wasn't necessarily a language that they had or they had available to them, but they were combining a number of different situations or a number of different triggers together and just putting it as one feeling. And what we then did was try to disentangle those then to try and increase that awareness of what is the combination of things that are happening into that moment of frustration and anxiety. Acknowledging what those different elements or components were, accepting that they were there and/or the, you know, the relevant level of control they had on it. And then being able to label it, was really helpful for them. And then that then kind of took them to that place where were able then to kind of release and process. So. Yeah, I love that. That kind of pathway description that you just, that you've just outlined there.

Sara Sabin

Yeah, I mean, I think I'm just gonna add something to that.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, please.

Sara Sabin

For anyone listening that is like, I didn't have time to do that in the moment. Who has time to do that when you're in the middle of meeting or a pitch, whatever it is that you're doing? You're basically training yourself to be able to do it in the moment the more that you do it. But even if you don't have that, there are hacks that you can do in the moment to switch your emotions quite quickly. So the message I want to say is that never let a situation or yourself push you into doing something from an emotional place. Like, you will always have 30 to 60 seconds that you can use to



regulate yourself. And it's well worth you doing that rather than you choosing to lead a presentation from a triggered place.

Phil Willcox

And what might be. If I just pick up on that theme then, what might be something that either you kind of share or explore with some of your clients in the work that you do, or things that you might do in those 30 to 60 seconds that bring you back. So, for example, one of my favourite things to do is I buy myself time through sort of summarising and paraphrasing. So I had this just yesterday, I was in a meeting with somebody and I was just massively overwhelmed by the volume of information they were giving me and my lack of clarity about what the ask was. It felt like I was just, it was just like an information kind of overload and I was trying to make sense of it and figuring out what it was. So my kind of my hack then I guess within that 30 to 60 seconds was to say, okay, so this is what I think I'm hearing. You're telling me this thing, this thing, you're linking that to this and that and the other. And I've heard all of that and I'm leaving it unsure as to what the ask of me is. So I'd really like to get into that next. But that's, and that summary just allowed me to, yeah, I guess make sense of what it was I was feeling, label what I was feeling and then process it to say this is what I need to do next. So that would be one of my examples. What might be an example that you would give for that, you know what you can do in that 30 to 60 seconds. Those, hacks to give you maybe those choices so you're not making a choice from an emotionally charged place.

Sara Sabin

So I'm going to give an easier hack and harder hack.

Phil Willcox

Oh yeah, go on. No, I love that. An easy hack and a hard hack. I like that.

Sara Sabin

Because and I'm also going to clarify like what each person does might vary from person to person, etcetera. So this is an individual thing, but as a general overview, a hard hack. Let's start there.

Phil Willcox

Yep.

Sara Sabin

Is to remember the power of a pause.

Phil Willcox

Okay.

Sara Sabin

It is so uncomfortable to do. I'm actually trying to doing it now as I'm speaking. Being able to pause for 30 seconds, not speak, is actually a real power move anyway. And in that time, if you use that time just to breathe and consciously take the pause and sit with the discomfort, you're reducing your emotional reactivity in that time. And when you speak, hopefully you're saying something impactful and of real value because you've taken the time to, that you need to actually answer the question or speak in a way that's really valuable. And an example of this is Elon Musk. Whether you love him or you hate him, if you've watched him in an interview, the interview will ask something and Elon Musk will just pause for however long he needs. He is not going to speak until he is ready to speak and that is A). To make sure that you know what he's saying is sensible, rational, whatever, but also it's a power move. Right. It's like, I'm going to do this when I'm ready, not when you're ready. I appreciate though for a lot of people, that's the harder route, but you can practice with some smaller pauses to start with, maybe not 30 seconds, but maybe 10 seconds. So that's the harder hack, easier hack before you go into whatever situation you're going into, meeting or presentation, whatever it happens to be, 30 seconds, doing a mental rehearsal of how you want that meeting to go is really helpful. So when athletes are about to, let's say they're a runner, right, just before they are taking off for their run, it's very common that they do this kind of mental rehearsal where they visualise this run that they're going to do. Now when we do that kind of mental rehearsal, the brain actually doesn't really know the difference between imagination and reality. And during that time, we're using the time to really see ourselves perform well during whatever it is that we're doing. And that can also include things going wrong, people asking you questions, and you handle it flawlessly because you are someone that can cope with any challenges. So that's a very simple piece that can actually be slotted together with other pieces as a hack, but it's fairly simple for most people to spend 30 seconds just doing that before they go in to do something.

Phil Willcox

Wonderful. So our hard hack then, being the power of the pause, using that to breathe, to sit with whatever it is that you may be, whatever emotions you may be experiencing, so that when you do have your turn or when you do speak, you're doing it from a kind of considered and calm place. And then for our easy hack, that 30-60 seconds of mental rehearsal before we go into that situation that we may be going into where we think it could be emotionally charged then, imagining it going brilliantly, imagining it going wrong and us dealing with it flawlessly so that we can sort of train ourselves to anticipate what is going to happen that's going to give us the best outcome, rather than maybe anticipate what might happen that would give us the worst outcome, would that be fair?

Sara Sabin

That is a great summary, Phil.

Phil Willcox

Wonderful, yay. So I think linked to this then is one of the, one of the areas that we discussed sort off air when we met before we recorded, which I found really interesting because I don't, I don't really hear people talk about it very much. You were describing about kind of this idea of repellent energy and how when you feel like you really kind of need something, or you really want something, it can kind of create this kind of repellent energy. So I wondered if you'd be willing to explore how



somebody might be able to kind of stay ambitious and driven without crossing that line into kind of pushing people away, or maybe I need to ask what is repellent energy first? And then go into that question after. So I feel like I now asked you five questions. So let's begin with, yeah, let's begin with repellent energy, shall we?

Sara Sabin

Okay. Yes, you might need to remind me that this question has been part two, but yes. Okay, so the only place that you may have heard this talked about if you are that way inclined, is the woo woo, esoteric world of let's say manifestation.

Phil Willcox

Okay?

Sara Sabin

So I'm going to ground this into something very practical that people can get their heads around. Let's say you are really feeling like you need a promotion at work. I have to get this promotion, I have to get this job title because I have to be at this place by this age. Why do people want that? Well, quite often it's a form of validation. If I don't get to this by this stage, I'm crap and I haven't achieved enough in my life, etcetera. So, you might think, well, who cares, right? You might think, well, I'm needy, but I know that. Or maybe you don't even know that. A lot of people don't know that they are needy. But if you are using words like need, have to, etcetera, I'm going to tell you are needy. Okay? So you might think that you're hiding this, but it is coming across in various ways. So non-verbal communication. We can't control parts of non-verbal communication because evolutionarily we're designed to pick up on certain bodily signals from other people. And you know, it's quite hard to be able to control that as a needy person.

Phil Willcox

Yeah.

Sara Sabin

And it's also often coming across in aspects of how you actually verbally communicate. So maybe the tone of voice you use, the speed, the way that you answer questions. So rather than taking a pause, you're like rushing to answer as soon as possible because you're like, I need this. I need to impress this person. I've also heard a coach use the expression needy is creepy.

Phil Willcox

Okay.

Sara Sabin

Which is literally one of my favourite expressions ever, because as I said, it always comes across.

Now I'm gonna put it into a couple of practical contexts so that people can get their head around it. So let's say you're out in the dating world, which I haven't been for a while, but let's say I was. And whether you're a man or a woman, you can tell [loud cough], excuse me, you can tell when the other person is feeling really needy. So maybe they're texting a bit too much. Maybe you can feel like they're trying to extract compliments from you, but there's something that, in the way that they're coming across that is giving off needy, almost desperate energy. Now, when that happens, it's repellent. You don't want to spend more time with that person. And if it's coming from a place of the other person needing validation, most people don't want to actually validate someone else. And it starts to become a person that you. That person starts from a person that you want to spend less time with. If we look at it from a sales perspective, again, there's something about very pushy salespeople, quite often that starts to repel other people. You go into an interview, you're telling yourself, I really need to get this job. And again, that is coming across because you're going to say things to impress people rather than being, coming from a place of genuine authenticity. So we can usually get a sense of whether there is something going on with that other person that is needy, whether we can put our finger on it or not. It might just be this feeling of, I just don't feel good about this particular person.

Phil Willcox

Yeah.

Sara Sabin

So that's. That's what I mean by this needy energy. Now, again, if you are needy, it's not a big deal. Like, first of all, be aware of it. We all get needy from time to time, and you can balance that out with certain things that you can do. But first of all, I'm going to ask, does that whole definition make sense?

Phil Willcox

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Yeah, absolutely it does. And I think the, that kind of where people are giving off a message. So they might be giving a message, but they're giving off a slightly different one, if that makes sense. So they might be saying one thing, but they, but they're giving off a slightly different message. So the message they're giving is, oh, yeah, I'm great at this, but it's giving off needy vibes or, you know, it's giving those things off as well. And I think the, one of my favourite kind of ways of describing it is, is taken from a friend of mine called Cliff Lansley and Cliff and I doing a lot of work together in the kind of behaviour analysis and deception detection world and he talks about, is actually sort of deception detection is the wrong way around because it, you're not trying to catch a lie. What you're trying to do is catch the truth, because people are always leaking the truth. They're always telling you the truth. The question is, are you paying enough attention to notice what the truth really is, rather than maybe what they want to give you? If that makes sense.

Sara Sabin

Oh my gosh, yes, that makes so much sense. And unfortunately for a lot of people, if you're not observant, you will miss that. But quite often it's in what someone isn't saying that the truth lies.



Phil Willcox

Yeah, most definitely. Yeah, most definitely. Okay.

Sara Sabin

I think there was a part two to that question.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, there was, yes, that's what I was going to do next. Yeah, there was. Yeah, that's what I was going to do next. So, so let's say you do feel like you really need that promotion or you need that sale or you need that job. How do I, kind of retain my ambition and my drive without being repellent?

Sara Sabin

Okay, so there are, I'll give a few things for people to look at. They're emotion related. There are other things, but these will be helpful. Now I want to caveat everything I'm going to say with reducing the emotion and want for something doesn't mean that you're gonna sit on the couch and eat crisps. Crisps or potato chips, depending on where you come from.

Phil Willcox

Depending on where you're listening from.

Sara Sabin

For the rest of your life. You're just taking away this real attachment to it that can give off this repellent energy. Right. So first thing, whenever we want something, we're actually chasing a feeling. So what I mean by that is a lot of people like, I need money, I want money. If I have money, I'm going to buy X, Y and Z. It's not the money themselves. Money itself, rather. So if you had a million pounds sitting in a bank account and you could never spend it, you're probably not going to derive that much pleasure from it because you're like, well, it's just here sitting in a bank account. Right. So it's not the money and I can never spend it. So what's the point? It's not the money itself, it's whatever it is that's underneath that's driving the want for it. So it could be external validation. That's quite often a factor. I want other people to think I'm powerful and great because I have this fancy car and fancy house and this and that and the other. It could be that the feeling is I never grew up with money and therefore I'm really wanting this feeling of security. So there are various reasons why people want the things that they want, and that includes a promotion. Again, do you want the promotion so you can tell other people that you're now CFO or whatever? So you want to identify whatever this feeling is, power, validation, freedom, whatever, and you want to try and give it to yourself. So, so let's say you want money because you believe it gives you freedom. And you, one of your goals is to be financially free. You want to find ways to prove to yourself that you are free at this moment in time. Let's say you want money because you want to feel successful. Know that no amount of money can satisfy an internal wound or feeling that you feel you're lacking. Right. Which is why a lot of multi-millionaires like, they're internally no better off.

Phil Willcox
Yeah.

Sara Sabin

For having all of this money because they thought the money would fix things. Right. So it's quite a hard thing to do. But in identifying what it is that you're trying to get from that thing and finding small ways to give it to yourself. Now you're starting to reduce that level of want. I mean, even if you think, for example, let's go back to money, you think it gives you power, you could go to the gym and train yourself to start lifting 50 kilo weights. And that's you being powerful in your body. Right. So it's another way of giving that to yourself. So that's number one. Number two is kind of balancing out this neediness where basically rather than being like, I need this to happen, I need this to happen. You are going to balance that out by making a list of all the negative reasons. Oh, sorry. Negative things that would happen if this particular thing happened. So, okay, let's. So let's say you're like, I need this sale to go through because I need money, right?

Phil Willcox
Yeah.

Sara Sabin

Then the negative reasons of the sale going through is I have to pay tax on it, I have to pay VAT on it. I'm suddenly going to up the level of pressure that I feel at work and that might be detrimental to me. So you're actually looking at the negative aspects of getting whatever it is you want. And there always will be negative aspects because nothing is wholly positive or negative. And again, this is serving to balance out the need. And you can take it to a really extreme way. You can be like, if I lost every cent I had tomorrow, like, and I had no money left, what would the benefits of that be? I've actually tried this exercise, be like, I get to get really creative about how I make money. I get to start again from ground zero, knowing everything that I know now. So I don't, I can bypass all the mistakes that I've made before. I get space to now think of a billion-dollar idea because I've got nothing to lose or whatever. So that again is starting to balance out the need. And then a third thing is just literally focusing on taking it step by step. So okay, you've said that you need whatever it is, but there's going to be a series of steps in a process in order to get whatever outcome it is. So rather than focusing on the outcome and going down a spiral of what if it doesn't happen, you're bringing your mind back to what the steps I need to take and you're taking them. And actually that helps to reduce anxiety anyway if you're just focusing on the next couple of steps in front of you rather than obsessing about the outcome. So that's three things that you can do to just kind of. What's the word? Stop bringing down that level of neediness.

Phil Willcox

Wonderful. Okay, so to summarise, if I may, then, if that's okay. So, yeah, thing number one, find small ways to be the feeling that you're chasing already. So in the example that we had, if what money gives you is freedom, how are you already free? Where do you already have a degree of

freedom in whatever it is that you're doing? Or if money is giving you security, how do you have a degree of security in what you have right now? So identifying the feeling that sits behind the thing and then recognising where you already have that small moments where you already have that right now. Second one then is what are the downsides or the maybe less palatable consequences of achieving the thing? So I really need to win this piece of work. If I win that piece of work, I'm actually going to be, I'm risking being too busy, I'm risking not spending as much time with my family, I'm risking deprioritising my physical wellbeing because I won't go to the gym as much. I'm risking not taking kind of holidays and breaks because I'm just working all the hours available, whatever that may be. So those kind of downsides, if I did get the thing that I want that I was going to get. And then rather than focusing on the big thing, which is winning whatever that would be or getting that job, it's about what are the next steps to get me to that big...what are the next steps to get me to that big thing? Okay, so I want to be the CFO. Rather than obsessing about being the CFO, let's just focus on what I need to do next to move me there and then next to move me there and next to move me there.

Sara Sabin

Yeah, that was once again an excellent summary. I'll just add one thing on the second point, which is balancing out the need. Because if someone was to say, oh, well, what if I come up with a list that's so extensive that I decide I don't want this thing anymore. If that happens, you probably didn't want the thing that much to start with. You just thought you did. But actually what this does, if you do really want the thing, is simply reduce the level of attachment you have to the outcome, which frees up your mind and energy and emotions to actually go ahead and do the things you need to do to get the thing.

Phil Willcox

That's a wonderful addition. Love that. Thank you. Wow. It feels like we've just. We've covered so much ground already. So we began with emotional mastery. That then took us into emotional neutrality, thinking about the pathway then that we follow around Awareness, acknowledgement, acceptance, labelling and then releasing or processing. We talked about the different hacks that we might use along the way. Then we've talked about the easy hack of breathing and the mental rehearsal, the harder hack of pausing and the power that can come from the pause. Then we talked about the kind of repellent neediness and what we can do around that. I think where I'd like to go next, and probably this is our final kind of theme before I then start to bring the episode together to close us off And I guess I think the thing that underpins, or maybe a current that runs through all of those different aspects that we've discussed is that of identity. And I mean, regular listeners to the show will know I am mildly obsessed with the role that identity has in emotion. And I think again, we talked about that kind of danger of hanging our identity on something, whether it be a job title or whether it be money or whatever it is. And one of the things that we spoke about was this idea of scaffolding and sort of scaffolding a healthy internal kind of self-esteem system, I suppose, or scaffolding a healthy internal approach to self-esteem. And what might that be like? Or how might people go about sort of doing that?

Sara Sabin



So I often talk about scaffolding in terms of [COUGH], Excuse me, I don't know what's going on with my voice.

Phil Willcox

That's all right, don't worry. It's all good.

Sara Sabin

I talk about scaffolding quite often in terms of confidence. So I'll talk first of all about what I mean by scaffolding.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, please do.

Sara Sabin

So most people by a certain point in their career, 30s, 40s, 50s, and beyond, have built up a, let's call it confidence scaffolding, which is based on all of the things that they've achieved so far. So job titles, going up a ladder, starting a company, a certain amount of money, whatever it is, all of these things are external. And that is wonderful if you never have any challenge in your entire life, right? So if that external scaffolding stays in place forever, then great, your confidence levels will probably last forever, but as we know, life doesn't tend to work like that we just sail through it without any challenges at all. So the problem starts to happen when that external validation is starting to become a bit shaky. So some examples of that are, let's say you suddenly lose your job one day and you're like, shit, my whole identity, to use your word, was based on this particular job. Who the hell am I? You see, people go into a state of depression after retirement because they built a whole identity on their working career and they don't know who the hell they are anymore. Maybe it's as simple as they were in a job where everyone was like, you are the best thing that ever happened. And then suddenly they move company and it's like the opposite. No one's, no one's saying that to them anymore. And so that scaffolding starts to fall down and with it often goes people's confidence. So what is the key? The key is to build up a sense of internal scaffolding that regardless of what happens externally, that scaffolding stays in place. So your sense of self-esteem and confidence stays in place. Easier said than done. But if we look at examples of highly successful people, there are instances where you can see their sense of confidence could have evaporated to nothing. So maybe we're talking about a billionaire that became bankrupt one day or some kind of massive project didn't work out. And if it had happened to, let's say, average Joe would have been like, oh my God, it's the worst thing that's happened to me. I'm shit everything. I'm going to give up.

Phil Willcox

Yeah.

Sara Sabin

Highly successful people, they have this sense of internal confidence that is almost akin to delusion,

right? So you might look in and be like, how are they actually so positive right now? And you can tell it's authentic because they're not attached to what's going on in the external world. They know and feel the sense of their own self-worth. They know and feel that they may have just gone bankrupt, but they'll make it all back up again like next year or the year after. And that's what really strong internal scaffolding can almost feel like. You're getting no validation and no positive input from the outside world. But it's not impacting your sense of confidence in any way because your sense of confidence is internal. And aside from, you know, billionaires and that kind of ilk of people, for most people, the only reason they ever have to build that sense of internal confidence is if something happens to really knock their confidence externally and they're like, wow, I'm in my 50s and I have less confidence than I did when I was in my 20s. That's something common that I hear. And then they're like, maybe it makes sense for me to actually build this internal sense of scaffolding so that I am not going to be as not buffeted by what's going on outside of me.

Phil Willcox

Wonderful. Thank you. So I think, what am I thinking? So I feel like what you've just described is kind of, I think so I'm thinking it's hit me quite hard is one thing I'm thinking in terms of the, sort of me reflecting as you were speaking around, you know, kind of where's the scaffolding for me then? You know, so in terms of where's, you know, is my scaffolding external? Is the scaffolding internal? And definitely, you know, over time or there's been moments where those external events have, you know, really kind of shaken me, I suppose, in a way where things have happened externally that has them like, like, shit, am I actually any good at this or am I just, like, have I just been pretending for however many, you know, how many years I've been doing this thing for. So yeah, so one of the things I was, I'm reflecting on is, yeah, what's my kind of internal scaffold and how strong is that internal scaffolding for me? What's something that works for you in terms of building your internal scaffold? If you don't mind me asking, if you'd be willing to share. What are some things that you do to think about your internal scaffold and where your kind of, where your internal confidence comes from?

Sara Sabin

So first of all, I'm just going to clarify one thing before I answer that question. So there are different areas of life that you could draw that scaffolding from. So family you could have a really strong scaffolding, but work you don't. Or financial area, you don't. So the only way to test the scaffolding is kind of a stress test right. So, first of all, the way that I look at external challenges now is positive. After I've gotten over the emotion to do with it, like, something happens. I'm like, God, this is so frustrating. I can't believe I'm back here again, what the F. And after I've kind of calmed down the emotion, I'm like, great, this is a stress test for me because I'm saying that my identity is not built on my work, but something that has happened work wise that has stirred up this emotion in me. And therefore, there is something there that is missing. Like maybe there's a crack or a fissure in the scaffolding that I can now look at to make that scaffolding stronger. So maybe one day, and this will probably be something that resonates with a lot of people one day, for whatever reason, something happens and imposter syndrome comes up, happens to everyone, no matter how academic or educated or successful they are. Now, if I'm prepared to look at that and be like, great, this has come up. This is showing me where there is a crack in, I don't know if scaffolding cracks, but there's a fissure in the scaffolding, because actually, in this certain aspect I feel a bit insecure, then I can



actually, I've identified the feeling, I've identified the need and I can start to build an internal structure that strengthens that part of the scaffolding that's weak. Now, without going into detail, because this would be a far, far longer conversation, how do you build internal scaffolding? It's again, with micro moments. So you're finding evidence of, let's say you have imposter syndrome because you don't know enough about, I don't know, astrophysics. I don't know why that's the thing that comes to mind.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, why not?

Sara Sabin

So you have imposter syndrome because of that. Now most people would be like, okay, well, I now need to go out and do a PhD in astrophysics. But actually that's not going to fix the feeling. So what you're going to do then is find evidence of how much you already know in that area. So that if you then choose to go out and do a PhD in astrophysics, you're doing it from a place of genuine curiosity, rather, than I'm doing this to kind of take something external to add to my scaffolding. So anytime you are compelled to do something externally because you feel like it's going to prop up that scaffolding, just pause for a moment, be like, okay, really, why am I doing this? What's going on here?

Phil Willcox

Yeah, yeah.

Sara Sabin

And how can I strengthen that scaffolding from the inside first?

Phil Willcox

Wonderful. I love that. And I think that's a wonderful moment, I think, to, yeah, to start to segue into closing the podcast episode off, because I think that was just such a compelling. Yeah. A compelling way to bring it together to a close, which is fantastic. So thank you. So as we move into that kind of closing off then, one of my sort of second unexpected questions then is, maybe it's too big, but I'll ask it anyway. In your kind of experience of working through emotional mastery and emotional neutrality and thinking about that scaffolding and what...and all of the different components we've discussed I suppose through the show today. What surprised you along the way?

Sara Sabin

Everything. Joking. Not joking. No. What's. What surprised me over the course of many years now is how much a focus on the internal world and addressing what's going on internally actually helps you externally as well. And I, I've seen this play out so many times. People just want to leap into, like, oh, I'm just going to do all these practical strategy stuff again. Totally needs to happen. Not taking away from that, but by just focusing on some of the pieces that form part of the internal world first, such



as emotional mastery, what they find is not only are they happier, more at peace, etcetera, but the way that people respond to them is starting to change naturally without them having to manipulate or try and control anything. It's not surprising to me now, but over the course of the years, I've been experiencing this, working on this, learning about this, working with clients. It was something that surprised me in the beginning.

Phil Willcox

Yes. Love that. Wonderful. Okay, so if our listeners, then, Sara, want to find out more about you, want to get in touch, what would be a good way for them to do that?

Sara Sabin

So you can go to my website, which is <https://www.sarasabin.com/>. Funny spelling of it, but I'm sure it will be in the show notes.

Phil Willcox

It will be.

Sara Sabin

And I'm active on LinkedIn. My profile is Sara Caroline Sabin.

Phil Willcox

Fabulous. Yeah. And we'll put links to both of those in the show notes as well, then. All right, so as we come to a close, then, Sara, is there something else or something more that you are thinking, feeling or would like to say before we close?

Sara Sabin

I'd actually like to say that I really enjoyed this conversation today and thank you for having me on the show. It's a great pleasure for me to just have space to talk about topics I'm passionate about, so thank you.

Phil Willcox

Oh, that gratitude is most definitely reciprocated. Thank you so much for being so willing to share your, share your insight and share your thinking and for me personally both through this episode and I'm sure when I listen back in the edit, there's going to be loads I'm going to take from it. So I think this is going to be an absolute corker of an episode for the listeners. So, yeah, all that leads me to do then is to say, Sara Sabian, thank you so much. Thank you so much for coming on the Emotion at Work podcast and, yeah, we'll see you soon.

Sara Sabin

See you soon.