Conflict, Communication + Discomfort with Amy Gallo Transcript

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Chris Congdon: How are you feeling these days at work? If you're like a lot of people, you might be struggling. The adoption of hybrid work has changed a lot of things – not just where and when you work, but also our relationships at work. How we build them. How we nurture them. And how we sustain them.

Those relationships at work are really important to how we feel about our overall experience.
Welcome to Season 2 of Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host Chris Congdon alongside our producer Rebecca Charbauski.

How we work has changed dramatically – regardless of where you work and on which days.
Amid all this change, employees and a lot of organizations are challenging long-held assumptions about how people work, what work means and the places people work. New global research shows in the last year people's productivity has dropped. So has a connection to culture and work-life balance. In the US, engagement is down significantly. And the likelihood of someone to leave their job in the next six months is way up.

It's a complicated world at work right now. We know employees are more empowered – but a lot of headlines say "the boss is back in charge." And wellbeing is more of a focus at work as people re-evaluate how work fits into their lives.

This season we want to move the conversation beyond who's doing hybrid work and when. Let's explore how work is **changing** and how to make it **better**. Rebecca, what's coming up this season?

Rebecca Charbauski: We've lined up a great season of guests who are experts in how to re-establish relationships that make work better. If you know anyone who needs to have a better day at work, we would appreciate it if you would share this podcast with them.
Our first guest is Amy Gallo. Amy is the author of Getting Along: How to Work with Anyone (Even Difficult People). She's going to give us some tips on how to deal with tough personalities at work.

CC: I'm also a big fan of the podcast Amy co-hosts for the Harvard Business Review called Women at Work. And Amy is contributing editor at Harvard Business Review, where she writes about workplace dynamics. Stick around, after our conversation with Amy to hear from Jessie Storey – director of design at Steelcase about how design can help with the things Amy talks about – like conflict, communication and discomfort.
Hi, Amy. Thanks for being with us today.

AG: Thanks for having me. I'm excited to talk to you, Chris.

CC: Yeah, I am too, honestly, because I've read so much over the years about dealing with other people. Then when I heard on your podcast Women at Work, which I highly recommend, I follow a lot of HBR's podcasts, but I really love the Women at Work podcast. So to our listeners, if you haven't heard that, I highly recommend it. When I heard that, Amy, you were writing this book, or you had written this book about getting along, and I think the official title is Getting Along: How to Work With Anyone (Even Difficult People). And I've read a lot over the years about this topic, but I have to say that your book was the first, like I really found it really helpful and really pragmatic and useful. I like a lot about the way you've kind of broken it down. So I want to dive into talking about those personalities. But first I'd like to talk about this within the context of hybrid work. Because this is the way that we're all working right now. And I'm just curious, like in the world of hybrid work, there are a lot of things we're trying to navigate and obviously relationships and interpersonal relationships as part of that. So I'm just curious, what are some of the things you're seeing about hybrid work and then navigating relationships at work?

AG: I think like anything that you think about in relation to hybrid work is that there are pros and cons, right? And, in some ways being remote, not seeing someone in person every day, not being able to read their body language – obviously if there are challenges in your relationship, if there's tension, unresolved conflict, you know, working in a hybrid model in a remote model would make those harder, right? We don't have as much empathy as we might when we see someone in person. These remote forms of communication, whether it's Zoom or text-based interactions like instant message Slack, right? All of those are ripe for misunderstanding and miscommunication. So if you don't have a strong relationship or if there are actual negative issues present in your relationship, those are gonna be harder. In a remote environment or a hybrid environment, and you aren't gonna have, you know, the hallway conversation to quickly smooth things over.
Or the ability to look someone in the eye to understand what they're truly meaning. That said, I have relationships with my Harvard Business Review colleagues that are really strong, and I actually worked remotely most of the time even before the pandemic. And I have found that the hybrid model or the remote model with them isn't that big of a deal. You know, I think it really depends on the quality of your relationships as well as your own personal preferences. I'm an introvert, right? I love being able to leave a meeting and go sit quietly in my living room for a few minutes before my next one, rather than having to chat with someone in the hallway. For others, I think about my husband, for example, who's an extreme extrovert, working remotely every day was horrible for him. He hated it. I think it really will depend on your personality and on on the quality of your relationships. I will say overall, you know, there is a deterioration of a connection, right? Where with these modes of communication are flatter, they communicate less emotion, they communicate less nuance, and that is gonna present challenges for you. And one of my biggest concerns, I'm actually working on an article about this, it'll likely be out, by the time this podcast is out, is that hybrid gives us an excuse to not address some of the conflicts that come up. Because we think, oh, I'll talk to them when we're both in the office. Yeah. But who knows when you're both gonna be in the office. Right? Especially if you don't have a strict hybrid in-office schedule, like many organizations don't.

CC: Yeah. Plus like, when I have a difficult conversation to have, I want to have that in person because I feel a need to have that kind of connection with somebody that's deeper than what I can get in kind of the 2D on the screen. I want to read your whole body language and I want you to read mine so you know what my intention is – so I can see that maybe some of those things would maybe sit out there and fester a little bit. So, let's talk a little bit about eight archetypes of difficult people. That was one of the things I found really helpful. And I think we can all probably relate to all of these. They've got great names: the insecure boss, the know-it-all.

AG: (Laughs) Me too!

CC: (Laughs) Maybe being nerdy crosses over into being obnoxious a little bit, but, anyway, you know, the pessimist, the tormentor, et cetera. I thought those were all really helpful. And in something that I was reading before we had a chance to talk, you said that the worst is the passive aggressive. So I'm just curious, what is it about the passive aggressive personality type that you'd say, that one's really tricky.

AG: Saying it's the worst is probably not fair because if you think about the costs of working with many of these archetypes, the cost of working with a person who exhibits those patterns of behavior, something like the tormentor or the biased colleague or the insecure manager are gonna have much deeper costs for you than working with someone who's passive aggressive. The reason I think passive aggressive is the worst is because I think it's the hardest one to address, because the other ones you can maybe be direct, you can maybe use some more indirect or influencing skills to nudge them in the right direction. But with passive aggressive, it can feel like, my friend Annie McKee calls it shadow boxing, where you're trying to land with them something, a comment, or you're asking them a question and it's just this constant evasion. I think it's the worst also because I think the advice I give in the book – I do believe it works – but there are many times it won't. I think there are lots of good reasons that someone behaves passive aggressively: they're afraid of conflict. They don't have power. They're afraid of rejection. Those are valid reasons to not be direct with someone. But it's also really hard for you as their colleague to fix or to remedy so that they feel comfortable being more straightforward.

CC: So one of the things I love on the podcast – I've described it as listening to you have a therapy session with people – so, again, for our listeners, if you haven't heard this, Amy has talked to people to callers or people in an audience and had their questions, and then she's answered them pretty directly. So do you mind if we do a little bit of that and role play a tiny bit? And of course, so we can hear some of the things that you might want to say, I'm going to try and be passive aggressive.

AG: Go for it. By the way, I have to say, you strike me as someone who would not be passive aggressive, so I feel like you're stretching your acting chops right here. Right?

CC: You can give me feedback and let me know whether I did a good job on this one, but, so if I'm passive aggressive, I might do something like say, "yeah, Amy, I'll send out an email after the meeting, or, I'll get back to you by the end of day," but then I never do. Is that a good passive aggressive?

AG: Yeah. That's a classic passive aggressive move. So first of all, if I know that you're the type of person who might not follow up, I might try to preempt that by you saying, "yeah, I'll send that." By the end of the day, I might get back to my desk and just send an email. Just say, "confirming what we just discussed, that you'll send that by the end of the day, right?" Because now I've got a record. Not that you're gonna forward that to their boss, or maybe if, if it becomes extreme, but you've put them on notice that I'm paying attention to your commitments, and if you don't do this, there'll likely be a consequence for doing so. So that's one thing to try to sort of preempt some of that behavior. When you know they do it. But if you didn't do that, and I have to come back to you and say, "you know, Chris, that email never arrived." And I might just even just say it like that. Like, Chris, I never got that email instead of ask and just leave it at that and then let you decide are you gonna make an excuse? Are you gonna tell me why? Right. And then can you play the role of passive aggressive if I stop by to your desk and say "that email you said you'd sent never arrived."

CC: Yeah. And I might go, oh, yeah. You know, I was going to, but you know, I got pulled into this other meeting and I'll get back to you. Or, is, was that what a passive aggressive person

AG: Yes. Dodging.

CC: Right.

AG: Yeah. And so then in that case, I might say, okay, well when do you think you could send it?

CC: I'll get on that tomorrow, Amy. Okay? Is that, is that what a passive aggressive person would do?

AG: Yep. And they may be lying and they may be lying or they might do it. What I would say is, "So great actually, could you send it by 9:00 AM because here's what will happen if I don't receive that email." Start laying out the consequences of their evasion. Again, 9:00 AM might roll around tomorrow morning, I still have no email from Chris. And then I might stop by your desk and, and say, "I still didn't get that email. I get a sense that there's something else going on that maybe you don't want to send the email. I totally may be misinterpreting that, but is there something else going on?"

CC: Yeah. Because I might be thinking to myself passive aggressive, like, Amy, you're not the boss of me. Like, why are you telling me that I need to get you this email by the end of the day or by nine o'clock, like, get outta my business. You know, I don't Yeah,

AG: That's exactly right. And so then it's like, okay, well what else is going on? And they may not say exactly what you just said – which is like, you're not the boss of me, I don't want to be engaged in this power dynamic with you – but again, you've shown them, I'm paying attention, I'm gonna hold you accountable. I'm not just gonna let this go. And you know, at some point you might even step back and say, after this maybe, let's say this is the second, third, fourth time this has happened, and say, "Chris, you know, I feel like when I ask you to do something, you don't always follow through. And I'm not sure if it's the way I'm asking or if there's something else going on between us, what's up?"
Really doing so in a way that makes them feel comfortable … you're not challenging, right? You'll notice I'm trying to keep a very neutral voice. I'm not trying to shame them. I'm just trying to sort of lay out and explain the consequences. I really am relying on you to help me with this project. The success of this project relies on us collaborating and following through with one another. You know, how can we get things back on track? What you just said a minute ago really struck me as something that I could see being effective. Because we've all probably worked with passive aggressive people and you just feel like you're butting your head up against the wall. But what you just said… about how this has an impact on me. If I don't get that email by nine o'clock, I need it because to me that felt less like you were bossing me around. She needs this because our work is interdependent in some way. So that, like, I would think that a passive-aggressive person might be really responsive to the way you just kind of coached us to handle that.

AG: The alternative is to explain how what something that you want, as Chris as the passive aggressive person is going to be hindered by this. Right. You know what, I'm concerned if I don't get that email, then I won't be able to send the report to finance. I think that's really gonna hinder the project we've been working on.

CC: Right.

AG: And you don't have to say, I know you care about the project too. Like, you don't have to do that. Just like make it clear, here are the consequences of not following through.

CC: This is great. Can we do another one? Yeah, please. I'm, we'll do like a rapid round of a couple here. So now I'm going to get into what I think is more familiar territory, which is the know-it-all. Let's assume I'm a man, and we're in a meeting and you're talking and you're sharing your idea and maybe I speak over you and kind of cut you off and say, yeah, thanks Amy, but I have a lot of knowledge on this topic and so, you know, let's not waste a lot of time. Let's just do X.

CC: How do you respond to that one?

AG: The tricky one about this – and not to nerd out on research – but the research shows that as an underestimated member of an underestimated group, it is much less effective for me to call out that behavior, right? For me to say, you just talked over me. Right? I could end up coming off as shrill, I could end up coming off as weak. Again, this is what research shows. So one of the best things in that circumstance is actually to have a pre-agreement with other people in the room. Maybe fellow women – anyone who you have a strong relationship with to say, you know, this, know-it-all interrupts me regularly. When that happens, would you be able to speak up and I'll do the same for you.

CC: Like my ally.

AG: Exactly. So then your ally says, "Hold up Chris, Amy didn't finish. You do have a lot of expertise here, but Amy does too, so let's hear her out." Okay? Something like that. Now you can, if you want to address it directly, you can also say, "I'm going to finish my point and then I'd love to hear what you have to say."

CC: Yeah.

AG: Just very direct. You might even say, I know you have a lot of insight. I do too. And in fact, I don't know if you're familiar with my background in this, and maybe even help educate them about your background. And now you don't want to get in a toe to toe battle with them about who has more expertise. But it's okay to say I have expertise too.

CC: You know, it feels like this can be tricky. Tricky in general, but particularly tricky depending on where you are in the hierarchy in the organization. So if the know-it-all is your boss, your CEO, that can be a really tough one. Do you vary how you deal with a know-it-all if they're really high in the hierarchy?

AG: Yeah. I mean, you have to be aware of the power dynamics and there's obviously the power dynamics. You're talking about positional power, but there's also reputational power. So maybe the know-it-all is a peer at the same level as you, but they're very well respected by the organization. So challenging them will maybe incur more cost for you. So you have to be aware of that, certainly. And sometimes you let things go because you know that it's too risky to challenge them. Now do I love that that's the case? No, but I do want to be realistic that, you know, saying to the CEO, you talked over me four times in that meeting is not gonna help you.

CC: Probably not. No, you're right.

AG: So think about what actually would be effective and what's my goal here? Is my goal to stop being interrupted? Is my goal to keep my job? Is my goal to feel good about how I've handled myself and then make a decision about how direct to be? Some people have a boss who they can … I have a boss in my work at HBR who I can just say, wait, what's going on? Like, what did you just say? Like, I have that relationship and you might too, in which case go for it. Right. But you do want to be aware of the risks. One caution though about the risks is I think we often focus on the risks of taking action and we don't think about the costs of inaction. So I think we need to remember when we're doing the risk assessment, is this safe to speak up? Will I incur any reputational damage from doing that? Also ask, well, what happens if I don't speak up? Yeah. And for know-it-all, sometimes the risk of not speaking up is they just keep doing it.

CC: Right. Right.

AG: We talk about interruptions as if they're rude, but they have costs. Like they can make you look, you know, inexperienced. Or that your ideas and your voice won't be heard. Those are really you … you want to take that seriously.

CC: You know, none of us probably wake up in the morning saying "I'm going to go into the office and be a know-it-all or be a victim or passive aggressive." So how do we identify this within ourselves? Is there a way that we can take this work and look back at ourselves and go, Hmm, am I doing that?

AG: You know, that's one of the most surprising reactions I've had to the book since it's been out – how many people comment on something I posted on LinkedIn or send me an email and say, I read chapter three and I realize I'm the insecure manager, it shocks me actually. Because it takes a lot of self-awareness to see that. I think even though it's not your intention, you do have to have a sense of the impact you're having on people. And this is where getting feedback, really valuable feedback can be helpful. Do you have people in the organization who you can go to and say, you know, I know there's ways in which I'm holding myself back. What do you think those are? I suspect, because chances are even though no one – I agree – no one gets up and sets off to be passive aggressive at work. Even though you don't intend that, you probably have a hunch that that's what you do. So then I would even test that and say you know, I know sometimes I'm afraid of conflict or I cannot be direct. Do you think I'm coming off as passive aggressive? Be sure to ask the person who's like, no, no, no, you're great. Right? Right. You want the person who will be like, Hmm. Yeah, I see that. Uh, sometimes, and you may even make it easier for them by saying, when I said this in that meeting, do you think it might've come off as passive aggressive? Or can you imagine a situation in which that would've sounded passive aggressive to others? Or put yourself in that person's shoes? Do you think they heard it as passive aggressive? Like, ask a very specific question and that will give you a sense. But self-awareness is hard. I mean, it's knowing that you, or even admitting to yourself that you might be someone's difficult colleague. That's hard to do. The more you can get reflection from other people, the more likely you'll be able to recognize these patterns.

CC: I've joked sometimes, how do we really know if we're self-aware? Like my self-awareness may be like, I think I'm a great person, I think I'm awesome, I'm self-aware of how awesome I am. So that could be a really tricky one to figure out. I want to talk to you about some other work that you've done. One of the things that I've also found really valuable, in fact, at Steelcase we use the Harvard Business Review guide videos and one that was done on active listening. We actually use those as part of our leadership training. I know that active listening is a lot more than just nodding or, you know, trying to be a sponge and kind of soaking in what you're saying. I was wondering if you could just share a little bit for our listeners about how you would describe good active listening skills and why it's so important.

AG: I do think people think active listening is like this nodding and really "I have my phone away, I'm making eye contact with you." Right? And sometimes that can make someone feel heard, but what really makes people feel heard is engaging with their ideas. So you're not just, like you said, absorbing like a sponge, but you're giving lift to their ideas. For example if someone comes to you and says, I'm really nervous about this speech I have coming up to the team, or my presentation to the team, instead of saying, "oh, don't worry, you'll be fine," you might think that's listening because you heard their concern and then you responded to it. Instead, you might say, "I also was nervous when I first started presenting to the team. What are you worried about?" So you're validating what they heard. You're acknowledging that other people also experience this, but then you're asking for more information. I think that one of the keys also with active listening is to think about what's the center of that conversation. So if you are talking, why are you talking and are you talking about yourself or are you asking, are you sharing a story because you want to talk and you want to hear your own voice? Or are you sharing a story because it's actually really pertinent to them? And are you asking questions because you want to prove how smart you are? Or are you asking questions because you really want to understand their perspective? I really think of it as engaged listening, not just active listening, but engaged listening. It's a back and forth, it's not, they speak, you listen, you speak, they listen. It's an exchange of ideas, a collaborative conversation in which you respond and interact with their ideas.

CC: I've been fortunate to have some of those kinds of interactions and you just feel better, you know, literally if I'm nervous about a presentation and rather than somebody just saying, ah, you'll be fine. Which, I know I'm sure I'm guilty of having done that with people in the past because I really believe they'd be fine. But when I have that kind of interaction where somebody says to me, okay, well, like, what is it that's making you nervous? And I can say, well, you know, I'm just, so-and-so is gonna be in the audience, and I just feel like, you know, when they're there, I get really anxious that they might judge me or, you know, they might just second guess what I'm saying? So like, I'm nervous about that. And then in an active listening situation, then being able to articulate that. Yeah. That gives you a chance to help me go, okay, now how do I manage through?

AG: Well, then you have so many places to go in that conversation, right. Why are you worried about that particular person? Yeah. Or, what do you think you could do to reduce how they like to spar a little bit at work, but I'd say most of us kind of want to avoid it. Yet you're an advocate for healthy conflict. I think emphasis on the word healthy. and I think some of the things we're talking about is already kind of touching on that a little bit. But I'd love for you to talk more about conflict and, and let's go back to the situation that we're in currently. I mean, I think it's going to be our new reality, which is this hybrid work, and I'm just wondering about how you feel about conflict in that situation and how to make it constructive and beneficial. So one of the things about having disagreements in a hybrid environment or remote environment is that you really have to be much more intentional, right? About making clear what your perspective is, making clear what your goal in the conversation is. You have to be patient that it might take some time to resolve the conflict. And, you know, I am an advocate of healthy conflict. And I think one of the things, you know, we were referring to this earlier, one of the things about hybrid is that it can be tempting to just say, eh, I'll put that off. Eh, that doesn't have to happen right now. Oh, we'll address that later. And I think we end up creating a situation in which we've sort of planted these evil seeds of discord that the more they grow, the more likely things are going to get worse.
You know, our interactions are going to get worse, our relationship is going to get more tense. The projects we work on together are probably going to suffer as a result. So addressing those pretty quickly and addressing the miscommunications, I share the story in, in my book of a someone who thought that her colleague was rolling his eyes at her during a meeting and on Zoom, and she just, she was so furious and she let this sort of fester for a while. And when she actually finally addressed it with him, he said, oh my gosh, I have a clock above my computer. That was the day I was picking up my kid from school and I was worried about being late. He was trying to look up quickly and it looked like an eye roll. And so had she said, wait, did you just roll your eyes? Right? Like he could've said oh no, no, I have this clock. Right? Or he could've said, yeah, you know what, I'm sorry, that's really rude. I'm actually just frustrated by what you said because it's not aligned with what my team has found out about this. You know, there's ways of addressing it in the moment that I think can be much more effective than letting these things fester. When I referred earlier about being intentional, the other thing is because we're not getting the body language right. You and I are on video right now while we're recording this. I can see from your neck up. I don't see what you're doing with your hands. I don't see your legs if they're fidgeting, I don't see the context in which you're sitting. So we really don't have a full picture. So getting on a zoom and saying, listen, my intention right now is to make sure that we're on the same page so that we can go back to our teams and smooth the way for a successful project launch, something that makes that clear before you launch into, wait, how did you see this? Wait, what's going on? You know, really just laying out, this is my intention, this is my goal. Trying to return to that goal if things get tense, that can help to compensate sometimes for some of the lack of context that we have, that we naturally pick up on when we're in the same space together.

CC: It feels like sometimes in this new way of working there's a lot of data and research about how meeting time is getting more condensed, like the rise of these short, but like rapid succession meetings that you're going from meeting to meeting to meeting. And it feels like that environment, it's really difficult to make time for or have the situation in which it's comfortable to kind of cope with any sort of interpersonal conflict. So it feels like that's one more hurdle that you have to overcome.

AG: That's right. Well, and this is a to, I mean, we think video conferencing is a good replacement for in-person and sometimes it is. But the reality is I'm sitting here looking you straight in the eye, which if you and I were gonna have a challenging conversation in a conference room or even in a coffee shop, we wouldn't look at each other the whole time. We'd look at our coffee, we'd look at the clock, we'd look at the table, we'd, you know, there was something so aggressive about having to look in someone's eyes the entire time when you're having a challenging conversation. So this isn't a great medium for these sensitive conversations for that reason, the lack of context, but also the aggressive eye contact we have to make and that doesn't mean we shouldn't do it, it's just we have to realize there are limits to it and there are downsides and we have to figure out how to compensate for those downsides. Sometimes actually when I'm having a tricky conversation, I'll choose to have a phone call, then I don't have to have this sort of weird eye contact, but I can pick up and I actually find for me, I pick up better the tone of their voice, their emotion if I'm not actually having to watch their body language. So somehow a phone conversation for me personally is easier for what might be a difficult conversation.

CC: That is interesting. Amy, I do want you to know, since we are on video, that if it looks like I'm looking to the side a lot, I have my notes on the screen. So I just wanted you to know that so you don't think, like, I'm not interested in what we're talking about.

AG: So see you just modeled that behavior perfectly. Like I'm just making clear what's going on. Same thing if I get on a call and be like, Hey, I'm waiting for a package. If I disappear for two minutes, it's just because I'm meeting the UPS driver at the door or whatever. That's the kind of stuff you would pick up. And if we were in the same room, I'd see your notes to the side. But I have noticed you looking inside, I assumed that I was giving you the benefit of the doubt that was what was going on.

CC: Thank you so much for that. Well, I just want to make sure and stay on track. So I have another question that I'm wanting to ask you about. It relates to the reasons why some people prefer remote work. You know, you were saying your husband, you know, really liked to be in the office. I know I'm an extrovert. I had a really tough time when I was spending most of my time at my home office. But, one of the things that I've wondered about is the reasons that people give, at least according to research that we've done and others have done. They're very pragmatic reasons that a lot of people say when they prefer to work from home. Like, you know, they want to avoid the commute or they want to avoid the time that it takes to get ready for work and all of that. What I've wondered about though is some of the things we're talking about, like the interpersonal relationships and is that something that might be playing a role here as well? I just don't want to deal with coming into the office and somebody who's that passive aggressive person?

AG: Anecdotally I have certainly had people tell me, oh my gosh, I'm so glad I don't have to deal with this colleague. Yeah. Now that I'm working remotely or my team is just so much more focused on the work and less on the drama now that we're working remotely. So I do think that that plays a role. And I, on the one hand, I, I especially, for people who are working with someone they find really difficult, I think about the archetype of the biased coworker in my book. If you're on the receiving end of microaggressions working from home and not having to deal with that, great. That must feel so relieving in many ways. Not that microaggressions don't happen in virtual environments, but having to not see that person day in and day out, especially someone who you may not have to interact with, but you would passively in the office, that can be a big relief. There is research that shows we are more task focused in remote environments. This was research done before the pandemic, so take it with a grain of salt. But you know, we tend to be more focused on the actual things we need to get done rather than the relational. Now there's a flip side to that, which is that we know from tons of research that having positive relationships with our coworkers is good for us, good for the teams, good for the work, good for the organization. So if we're short changing that, if we are not forming relationships because these mediums are not as conducive to it, it's likely going to hinder the work as well. I think with all things hybrid, there's both positive and negative. I do think some people have found relief in these work setups. And I think that there's also a risk that we are forgetting a really important part of how we do work. And I'm actually curious, Chris, what's your take on that? Do you think people, the hesitancy to go in the office has to do with interpersonal dynamics?

CC: The reason I asked the question is just because it struck me when I was reading your book that I was thinking about what are some of the things that to me as I've worked at home, I thought, well, you know, at least I don't have to deal with this or, you know, and, and I began to wonder about that. But I think one of the things I worry about, honestly, is one of the benefits of coming into the office is I get to see all kinds of people – different people from different backgrounds. I feel like I've learned so much over the years from people from different cultures and, just, I have to deal with people who have different political views than I do, and I have to interact with them. I worry a little bit that if we don't put ourselves out and put ourselves into that situation in the workplace, are women missing out on actual development and growth that's gonna help us personally as well as help our organizations.

AG: That's such a good point. I think there is this idea that we are self-selecting into smaller and smaller communities, or echo chambers if you want to call them that, and that hybrid or remote work allows us to do that. Right. Like, now I get to only interact with my two best work colleagues. As opposed to all of these people. That is a real downside that I think about this a lot in the context of conflict and difficult conversations. There's discomfort that comes with interacting with other humans, of course. That I think many people feel like, well if I could just avoid that, right? But that's how you learn, that's how you grow. That's how you create really interesting work together. That's how you can be more innovative. I think the insistence that so many people have on feeling comfortable and therefore avoiding conflict or avoiding interacting with people who aren't like them, we're doing ourselves and our organizations and certainly society a disservice. I do think that's an important point is that by working from home, we get to choose, you know, who we have the Zoom coffee with is probably going to be the person who looks and thinks and acts like us.

CC: Of course. And you know, another group I just add to your list there is the younger generations, you know, who our data shows, those are the people who are coming into the workplace the most, where it's generations, gen X and boomers that maybe are coming into the workplace a little bit less. So I think, well, how are the younger generations learning? Are they getting a chance to see us model how we deal with relationships and how we deal with each other? If we're not showing up, so I'm going to encourage all of my fellow Gen X baby boomer folks, if you haven't been into the office this week, you know, go in and hang out with some of our colleagues or newer colleagues in the workplace.

AG: This tension of do I work from home? Do I go in, you know, especially in an organization where I think we've rightly given employees flexibility to make the choice. It's hard. I feel the tension myself of like, I want to go in, I want to see my colleagues, but do I really want to commute? Sometimes I have internet trouble when I'm there. But I get to hang out with my dog if I'm home. I think we, and I know you all are really thinking about this, we need to create reasons for people to come in and spaces in which they can do these things that they want to do, which is interact with others. One of the reasons I went to the office recently was for a training, and it was a training on creating inclusive content. And it was wonderful. I was in a room with people I hadn't seen some since pre pandemic. We were talking about ideas. It was one of those things that obviously was so much better in person, and I was like, this is a reason to come in. I just think we need to create more reasons like that for us to be in the office.

CC: You know, one of the phrases that we've been using a lot is, how do we create places that earn the commute, that earn people's commute? If you're going to bother to drive in, how do you create a space that gives you that sense of belonging or be able to create those kind of relationships and feel a sense of community with people. Yeah. So how do we begin to think about designing experiences differently?

AG: I love that. Earn the commute. And it's not just the actual time in the car or on the bus or whatever. It's the mental hurdle, right? The commute is also a mental commute. How do I extract myself from the comfort of my own home and my pajamas and all of that and put myself into that space?

CC: Amy, I know I could talk to you all day if you gave me the opportunity, but this has been a great conversation and I'm just really grateful that you took the time today to talk with our audience about the things that you're learning and seeing. Do you have any last thing that you would say to people? Any last words of wisdom about dealing with difficult people at work or listening?

AG: First of all, thank you for having me. This has been a fun conversation, but one of the things I really do feel strongly about is that we have to experience some discomfort, conflict, disagreement. Those are not easy things. I've written books on this, you know, hundreds of articles on this topic, and I still struggle with it. But that discomfort isn't a signal that you shouldn't do it. It's a signal that you're learning and you're getting better and you're doing the right work. So I don't want you to feel unsafe, but feeling uncomfortable is okay. And in fact, you know, something you might want to even lean into.

CC: I love that. Thank you so much for being with us today, Amy. I really appreciate it.

AG: Thank you, Chris. This has been great.

Chris Congdon: So I'd like to introduce my colleague Jessie Storey and she's joining us from Munich where she as an american has lived and worked in our design studio in europe for the past twelve years so Jessie has just this great sense of kind of this intersection of cultures and you know how how to navigate all of that and it just feels like this conversation that we've had with Amy really feels like one that I wanted to talk through with Jessie. So. Jessie. Thanks for joining us today. Well so let's dive right in because one of the things that Amy Talks about is you know how obviously work has changed. We've dealt with this for a long time because as a colleague, you know on the other side of the world. You know we're used to interacting with each other on video and sometimes having the opportunity to be in person. But for I think a lot of people in the hybrid work Environment, this is really a new experience of having People who are not always in the same place and so I'm just curious What you think about how organizations can begin to design workplaces that help us build relationships when we're not all physically in the same place at the same time.

Jessie Storey: Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure. it's something that we've definitely dealt with for a bit and I think what benefit has come out of the last couple of years is that we have a little bit of shared empathy over now what it is to be remote and to be on kind of the maybe the minority end of the present spectrum when we do have meetings. Whereas I think in the past it was more that somebody would call in and maybe they were always the person from Germany calling into an American group. So so at least, there's a little bit of a shared understanding now of what it feels like to.

CC: Yep, yes. Right.

JS: On the other side of things, I think one of the things we talk about is just how to build a little bit more equity across presence. so even when you're not there, how do you make somebody feel like they can not only follow the conversation but contribute to it, and that they're not missing out I guess because they're not there so going into what that means for space design and the products that we build and try to make to help that really look at thinking about that through the lens of the person that's joining a space remotely, not just designing it. Physically being there in person but what it might be to experience it through the camera lens as well and then a huge part of this is also just we've spent more energy now than ever orchestrating these interactions you know trying to be movie directors and instead of just being freed up to be humans talking to each other about ideas and work that we're doing sometimes we have to divert a lot of energy into just orchestrating. So one of the best things we can do is just make that easier and try to remove the burden of orchestration of trying to, you know, just have normal work interactions.

CC: Yeah, you know that's such an interesting point. I hadn't really thought about it in terms of orchestration but you're right it is a little bit like creating a movie production. You know you have to think about your set and your lighting and your audio and all of those kinds of things that maybe you know we we. Ah, well well andI would just go further that a lot of organizations maybe haven't thought about you know you might still be living in an environment where it's just your laptop and that doesn't always create the best experience right? Yeah, So um, so I want to talk with you about another thing that Amy had to say that I I just thought was so interesting and this idea about being uncomfortable and I think what she was talking about where you know did she's saying that that Avoiding conflict or avoiding interacting with people like that's easier for us to do now kind of in a hybrid environment. but at the same time I feel like as a designer like all the designers I know seem to be the people who are most comfortable with being uncomfortable. If that makes sense, I'm just kind of curious What you think about bringing together this idea of creating environments that are inclusive and meshing that with dealing with this discomfort that we feel when we are maybe put in situations that push our boundaries a little bit.

JS: Yeah, I love when Amy talked about this and she said something along the lines that because of discomfort it really encourages the collision of ideas that normally wouldn't come together right? It's those creative frictions that we say are pretty much the the transaction of what you need for innovation and so if companies want to be more agile and more innovative you need to kind of enable these collisions and sometimes they're uncomfortable because you just need to be exposed to ideas that maybe aren't in your own head or in your in your echo Chamber as she also mentioned. So I Think when it comes to designing workplaces. It's about making sure that people do feel comfortable because you provide them with the right? I don't know the variety of assets that are the right thing for them at the right time of the workflow that they want and give them comfort in being there but consequently. Because you are in a space that has your needs met in a variety of ways you do have a natural interaction with people right? And so it is about balancing this idea that we are getting cozier and cozier and sort of a little bit more isolated and at some point I think, there's a point where you're just like okay you don't know what you don't know from sitting in your home by yourself and you kind of want to go out to the grocery store right? or you want to go out and walk around town and I think that like Urban planning Metaphor is always very interesting for the workplace where it's like you want to have a comforty home kind of feeling where you're.

CC: Right!

JS: Maybe more trusted people around you. But then you also want the opportunity to feel permission or empowered to get exposed to other things without being too far out of your comfort zone. So I think there's just a balance there between providing comfort by meeting people's needs and especially the variety of needs that they might have, but also giving them I guess the excuse and catalyst to exchange.

CC: I always feel like you know when I come into the workplace in Munich where you know you're living I always feel like I somehow have achieved that vibe, that feeling like literally it feels like the place is within a physical neighborhood. But then when I come into the workplace it has kind of that neighborhood vibe where I'm able to see and interact with people. I'm just curious if you have any specific thoughts about how you guys achieved that.

JS: I think that was something you know recognizing that this well let's call it friction or the ability to exchange with each other ah is absolutely critical I think um, especially for how we talk about what innovation is and so if you build an innovation center you think okay well, what does that mean for how you zone the space and design the space to make sure that people feel a sense of permission to be in other people's natural territory or even beyond that incentivize them to be there. So one of the things that we look at often is what's a communal attractor or what's the thing that incentivizes somebody to go to a space that they maybe wouldn't go otherwise. So if you think like everybody, again I'm going to use the Urban planning metaphor, but if people live in their own apartments or their houses and they go to the City Center like a work cafe, that's where the main exchange happens. But what's going to take them to somewhere else outside of that – you know might be the fancy grocery store that they want to go to once a month or something like that. In the past it was things like special video conferencing rooms but now everybody has a video conferencing room on their laptop. so so really it's like where are the places that they want to go that will attract them to places that that aren't necessarily owned that they can go to and say oh I'm allowed to be here and in doing so their route to that particular destination enables them to see things that maybe they don't normally see or walk by, certain functions or teams that they wouldn't normally say, oh Wow I didn't know this state sustainability team was working on that I'm I'm going to be working on that too. Maybe I should actually learn more about that. So it's really kind of mixing the pot as far as I like. You don't know what you don't know. But if I give you an excuse to walk by it, you know a little bit more right.

CC: That is so interesting. Jessie thank you so much. I know we could talk for hours about this. But I think that this has been a really helpful conversation. So I really appreciate you joining me.

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RC: Join us next week for our conversation with Heather McGowan. Heather is a future-of-work strategist and author. Find out why she says learning is the new pension. We hope you join us.

CC: Thanks again for being here – and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.

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