Ali:
Hi Heather.

Heather:
Hi, I'm so glad to talk to you.

Ali:
Yeah, me too. I know this is kind of a hard topic, but I know it's one that you have some big feelings about and you have some great frameworks for us. And so I thought it'd be lovely to talk to you about how to fire and how to do it well.

Heather:
I think you were probably surprised that when you asked if we, if I wanted to do a podcast on how to fire someone, I was like, I'd love to because I am probably overly enthusiastic about this topic. And I think, not because I love firing people, you know, I've thought for a long time, if you get to the point where firing people is, is no big deal to you, should, you should get out of management business because this is a big deal.

I mean, we're talking about someone's job and career and you need to take it really seriously. But I do think the reason I'm enthusiastic about this topic is that I think it sort of touches a few things. One is about how we deal with human emotions at work, like ours and other people, how we handle this kind of process. How do we weigh...dealing with people humanely as individuals with how we balance that with the needs of the whole, how we make these decisions, how we handle them. And then how do we set and convey clear expectations to people and create the best conditions for achieving them and how do we enforce them, right? And so I think that all these topics come up because when you're firing someone, it should be the end of a series of conversations you've been having with someone. And as I mentioned to you, I have this firing script, but it starts with, you should be able to say, as we have been discussing... Right?

Ali:
Right.

Heather:
I think that something I've heard a lot over the years is like, I don't want to give people this feedback that telling them they're not good at their job, that feels so yuck, right? And it doesn't feel good. It feels not nice, right? But we have to separate kindness and being nice, right?

Being kind means you sometimes have to be direct and to be clear. And what I say to people when they say this to me is like, okay, well, it may not feel good to tell them this feedback now, but it's gonna really be not nice to fire somebody without having given them this feedback over a period of time and giving them a chance to change. Right? Not being clear is not kind.

And so I sort of start this, conversation with people by saying like, okay, if somebody's having

performance issues, and we're really talking here about performance issues and not layoffs or something else is very different kind of conversation. You know, if you're if you're if someone's struggling and having performance issues, think to what you want to be able to say if you have to fire that person, what do I wish I had said to them months ago to give them the best possible chance of addressing this behavior, these performance issues. It doesn't start at the moment that we fire someone. It's like, how do we give them clear expectations and clear feedback on what's actually happening leading up to that point?

Ali:
Yeah, which. That points to, like you said, having the comfort in having those feedback conversations, which, I mean, I could rattle off a handful of clients that I'm working with right now that are in the situation where they're like, man, I gotta let this person go, and their HR person is like, whoa, back the bus up, we need to make sure that they're getting feedback so we do this process correctly.

So there's already this tension, right, of like, oh, it's time this person needs to go. And then it's like, oh no, wait, we have to do this process. So the failure to do that gets you, can get, you know, folks in these really sticky situations where it's like, oh my God, this person is not working and we have to wait, oh my God, 30, 60 days.

Heather:
Totally. The clock starts ticking when you start giving that feedback. It's easier to say what people are doing that they shouldn't do, than it is to tell them what the expectations are. So an exercise I often do with people is like, okay, tell me all the things this person's doing that's driving you crazy or disruptive to the team or is interfering with good outcomes, any of these things.

Okay, make that list, which is usually an easy list to make, right? And then on the opposite side of the page, if they weren't doing this, what would they be doing instead? And so you're reversing it to get to that clear expectation. So this is what it looks like. So these things are happening, but here's what I'd really like to see.

I mean, often when we give feedback, we'll say, people will say, um, you need to be better at being a team player. You need to be better at this, this. Well, what does that actually mean? We may not have shared definition. So actually like saying, if you were a team player, these are the behaviors that would be seen. If you were working as a collaborative coworker, whatever the feedback is, you would be doing this set of things. These are the behaviors that we would see that would signify that this behavior was shifting, that things were changing. And so doing that reversal can sometimes help in with something proactive, not just hear all the problems that you have, but like here are the behaviors that I would love to see.

Ali:
Yeah, yeah, and that is an important piece is the painting the picture of really where that person

needs to be looking or what success looks like. I feel like a lot of clients will just be like, something is not working. And so they have to work through, is it behavior? Is it performance-related? Is it like a skills thing? Like, are they just not good at their job that we heard them to do? Or are they acting weird and what is that? And it can...It can really require someone to pause for a long think and reflect on what's happening, like you were saying, breaking it down into columns. But sometimes it's like, what's happening? And is this an interpersonal thing? Is this a personality thing? Is this person acting out of threat? Is this a performance thing? Are they just tanking as a CMO?

And how to so that really helps someone kind of identify like, at what point do we enter this conversation and with what how do we start articulating basically how we're gonna open the issue, I guess, with the person.

Heather:
And we're talking about one end of the spectrum, which is...not giving enough feedback early on. And then there's this other extreme, which is like when it's very clear, I mean, you've probably seen this a ton, so have I. It's very clear that there is someone on the team who is toxic to their coworkers or like consistently not delivering or whatever it is for a very long period of time. And there will be a hesitation to fire because maybe...the person who's making that decision feels like if I just worked harder at this, or if I just gave more feedback, or you know, maybe I don't know how to do my job well, and it's all the signs are there that you've exhausted that, right? This is the other the other extreme. And I'm always surprised. I always say to people like, I really am like a big-hearted softie here.

But you know, there are certain clients who have worked with them like, I'm sorry. Like we've been talking about this for some time. Like you've been saying, like this has been causing, this has been causing a lot of pain for you and the team, and this person not delivering for a period of time. But it's hard to make that decision. And I appreciate when managers really feel very responsible for creating the best conditions for their team. But we are also managing adults and you can create all the great conditions and sometimes it still doesn't work out. And it doesn't mean that you have to just keep trying harder, right? And I think that's sort of the shadow side of feeling very responsible as a manager, that sometimes you can feel like it's all your responsibility.

Ali:
Yes. Have I done everything I could for this person?

Heather:
Have I done everything? If I just worked on this with someone for another six months or a year, could they turn it around? I can, you know, sometimes hearing conversations with people who struggle with this, almost how it sounds in their brain, like, yeah, I mean, it's still a problem, but you know, I see some signs, I see some hope, right? And you can kind of hear, and it's a beautiful thing to...Again, want to be want to create great conditions and wanting everyone to be

successful. But you can't control everything with adults.

You can only you can control. You can you can create a lot of great conditions. You can lay the groundwork. You can give the feedback. It doesn't always work out. And. I think this, you know, part of part of being a leader is that you have to shift from just indexing on a single individual to really thinking about the entire ecosystem and the effects of these sort of issues we're talking about on other people on the team.

Ali:
Yeah, I mean, as you were talking about, you know, like, the manager, the leader who will go to the ends of the earth, right, to create the right conditions and make it better, and they see just a small maybe glimmer or shadow of improvement, and then they're like, oh, I have hope. I mean, at some point, it's like, it doesn't, that level of empathy just doesn't work, like it doesn't function well in an organization. Yeah.

Heather:
Right, right, absolutely.

Ali:
And then the rest of the team, like, I don't know if it's fair to say they become collateral damage, but like damage is done, right? You know, the rest of the team, while we're either waiting for a said person to get better or, or stop being a toxic drain. Um, yeah.

Heather:
Yeah, I mean, it also there's a real cost for the leader as well. Right. In an effort to show empathy to this one person, the rest of the team may really feel unheard. It really may cost a lot of credibility for the leader. Like you're asking us to make tough decisions, do hard things, and you're not doing it right. It may not be perceived as empathy by the other people on the team who feel lack of motivation, there's a lot of cost to the whole ecosystem when we keep hanging on to one person who's causing problems for other people, causing problems for the culture.

Heather:
I think it's a lot this is all much easier if the behaviors are really extreme or the things not working are very extreme. The truth you know the truth of it is most of the time it is like there are some things that are working but there's a whole lot that isn't right. Or I really like this person and it's this is not to your point, this is not working. That's much harder. And I think the hardest one is, it's just not good enough.

This is fine, everything I guess is okay, but doing the job really well would look very different. And it can be hard to articulate that gap in terms of feedback. And I mean, look, I mean, as humans, we tend to make decisions when we get, we get it in a lot of pain. And so if a situation isn't on fire, we may have a tendency to wanna leave it a lot longer because otherwise why would you want to introduce intentional stress into the system? It's stressful when someone's

fired. It's stressful for the person being fired. It's stressful for you. It's stressful for the whole team because it's a change. And so sometimes there are situations that can just stay not great for a very long time because it hasn't gotten painful enough.

Ali:
Man, I'm just feeling into this. It's also hard to watch the struggle when you're on the team and you're watching whoever's managing, whoever the not working out well person is, is to watch them struggle even with their own process around managing that or managing them out. That can be really, really hard.

Heather:
Yeah. And I think what you wanna feel when you're on a team is that things are fair and that...My observation on how people react to someone being terminated is largely about how safe they feel with their manager. So if they feel like, you know, I know I'm comfortable, I'm not worried this is going to happen to me right now because I know that I'm getting really clear and consistent feedback from my manager. I know what's going well. I know what I need to work on. I'm constantly working on that. We're in conversation about it.

People with managers like that tend to freak out less when someone else is fired because they're like, okay, this is this is a change. Yeah, that's stressful as a human. But what I know is that I'm getting clear and consistent feedback and I trust that there's a fair process here.

Ali:
Yeah, yeah. The clear and frequent feedback is such an important piece, I think, in maintaining relationship and in maintaining clarity in where we stand with each other, I'd say in life and especially in work.

Heather:
I think that one thing that comes up a lot around the feedback is understandably like it's manager imposter syndrome. Like who am I to tell this other person what they're doing and not doing well?

Interestingly about feedback, it's not just about getting good feedback constantly. That doesn't always make you feel better. You want to also know that if something's going wrong, your manager is going to tell you. So if you're getting balanced feedback throughout, well, we don't just wait to give...somebody feedback when there's a big problem. I mean, the headline here is like, we should always be in conversation about how things are going, right? We should be telling people what they're doing really well. And we should be having a constant conversation about development issues and movement on those things. And everybody has development issues that they're working on.

And for most people, it's like two or three things, two or three things that come up over and over as we know from working with clients, right? Right? Everybody has a set of things that show up

over and over again and we're working on them over time. It's part of our personalities, part of our habits, and behaviors. And, you know, these should just be conversations that we're having consistently.

And people feel safer when they know that you're talking to them about it in a balanced way. It doesn't make people feel better to have a manager who tells them how great they are all the time and they never hear anything that they need to work on. Cause they're like, is there really anything? Do I really trust this? I mean, anybody who tells you everything that's wonderful all the time and never has anything bad to say, you're like, Do I do I know you would really tell me like, can you tell me? Are you capable of telling me if there's a problem?

I don't think that generates a tremendous amount of safety. Feeling safe is when you're like, Yeah, I know that if there's a problem, they're going to tell me because they tell me they deliver that feedback to me. I know where I stand. Right? That's when you start to feel safer at work.

Ali:
Mm-hmm. Man, I just, all of the, this is so relational.

Heather:
Well, it all is, we're all humans working together, right? Ha ha.

Ali:
I think everyone, oh my gosh. But we bring in our own relational imprints to, you know, our roles and our roles as managers. And I'm just thinking like the podcast that we spit out today was on rupture and repair. And I mean, that's something that we learn, I mean, when we're a little ball of neural clay, right? Like, what was it like in our parents' relationship before we were squeezed out into the world? And what did we learn about being in relationship or what was safe to be in relationship? What did it mean to be safe in relationship? Like, you know, from our early days onward. And it's just like that.

If we just removed the work layer. Like that's a piece of work for so many people. So many people. And then you add like the confines of work. And so I guess I'm feeling for the managers that are…

Heather:
…and the scar tissue we bring in from previous jobs. Let's add that to the mix too, right? All the projections we're all making on people based on what we've experienced before.

Ali:
Oh yeah. Yeah.

Ali:
Yeah. It's a lot to navigate. And so when it comes time to give feedback, positive or negative,

more negative, that's hard. And when it reaches the point where you're like, oh, it's time to let this person go, it's doubly hard for the manager that doesn't have the skills.

Heather:
Yeah, and when we think about, I'm so glad that you brought up family of origin stuff, because it's so cultural influences our family's confrontation style, like it so shapes the lens through which we view conflict. What is what, you know, even when we think about feedback, like what we think may be super harsh feedback for people is completely determined by what we perceive to be normal.

And so what may feel like super harsh feedback to you to somebody else is like, oh, thank you so much for that feedback, right? They may have a different comfort level with more direct feedback than you do. Right? And so the manager carries that sort of bias into how they shape the feedback as well. It's really fascinating to me. I mean, they're just so many layers. Like when we go through this whole process at work, we're just showing up as humans with all our stuff. I mean, it's so embedded in every stage of this.

Ali:
Yeah. Yeah, it's intense.

Heather:
Yeah. I have a script for firing as I've told you that I give to people because I think, you know, it's so hard to find the right words. This isn't one of those coaching topics where you're like, well, what do you, what do you think you should do? Like if you haven't done this, it's really hard to find these words, right? And so, um, I, you know, I think especially imagine being a founder who's hasn't managed people or hasn't, hasn't been fired before or fired somebody in a company as a manager. How would you even know how to do that? Right.

And so I have a script. And one of the things I say in the script is, um, like, just accept that this is going to be awkward. Just know that this is going to be an awkward conversation and like just understand that what we're doing here is really painful. And you don't have to, you can't fix this. You have to do it with as much dignity and kindness and directness as possible.

But if you just go into this knowing like, this is gonna just be awkward, there might be some very awkward silences or things that are uncomfortable. I just have to sit with that, relieve the pressure to like…You can't like charisma your way out of this, right? You're delivering bad news and it's gonna be uncomfortable for everybody.

Heather:
I've noticed, I think there are two kinds of extremes. Like one is getting so nervous about the emotion of it, that there's a tendency to go into like robotic mode. Like I'm just gonna deliver this, this is a, you know. And in that case, we're not really treating the person as a human, right? But it's our own discomfort with all of it, understandable.

The other is to like try to soften it so much that it may not even be clear to the other person what's happened at the end. Like, did I get fired? Is this like a final decision? You know, like if we're just so uncomfortable with it that we may soften it so much. And so I think that right balance is to be kind but be clear, right?

Ali:
So is there a framework to your script?

Heather:
There is. My framework is sort of like this:

Signal at the onset that it's going to be a tough conversation. You know, all the research, John Gottman says, we always want to queue up and give a signal. We don't just launch into this. So just that little queue. "

So this is going to be a hard conversation that we're having today. I want to share some information with you and then we can discuss it. So the person knows what the structure of this somewhat looks like." And then deliver the news and be direct.

"As you know, I've been giving you feedback about X and Y for some time. We've been talking about this and there just hasn't been enough improvement. We've made the decision to end your employment here." Or your job is ending, whatever it is, whatever language you choose to use. But we don't like bury the lead, we don't talk a whole bunch about so as you know, "we're making all these changes and I'm going to be promoted and this is happening." We don't like once you say to somebody, this is going to be a tough conversation give them the courtesy of addressing the anxiety that they're probably feeling by being really clear and direct about what's happening, right?

And so again, ideally, we have been talking about this for some time, and we're not gonna go through a bunch of examples and details because then we end up talking about all those things. We say, we've been talking about this, it hasn't shifted enough, this decision is final.
And then I think there is an opportunity here to be human. I mean, my language for this is I know this is really hard to hear, and I'm sorry, it's been a tough decision to make. I really wish there were a different outcome.

And it can be scary to say that because that's again, where we wanna like pretend like it's all cut and dried and be really firm and robotic to deal with the feelings of it. But you can acknowledge like this is a test. I wish this were different. I wish we weren't here. I know this is hard to hear. And this may be the point where the person's very upset.

Ali:
Well, you know it's funny, even as you were like reading me the script, like I started feeling like

anxious and I was like, oh, wow, I know I'm not getting fired today. And, you know, I think that's what happened. I mean, that's what happens innately in our brains when we're in these conversations on both sides.

Heather:
I was feeling anxious as I read it if it makes you feel better. Yeah.

Ali:
It's, I mean, which just goes to show how crazy this process is for both humans, for the humans on both sides of the table. And it's incredibly fair to say that the moment you enter into this conversation, the person that you're communicating with is pretty much going to be offline in terms of like rational brain and it's going to be full on emotions and big emotions. And so being clear and kind and in a way, brief, you know, is just as kind in a conversation like this, right? Like, here's the deal, here's the decision, here's what's happening, here's what we do now and let's talk about it later.

Heather:
And this is where it gets so uncomfortable, right? Because you don't know.

Ali:
Yes.

Heather:
It's scary when you're about to drop a really heavy thing on somebody and you don't know how they're going to react. And this is my like, it's going to be awkward. They're going to be awkward pauses. You have to be tuned into what's happening right then. Right. And so, you know, in my script, um, you know, I, in an ideal world, you have sort of this moment where if somebody's having a…is really struggling, you can see that happening and that you have the option available to say, if you can see that they are shut down and they can't take in any more information, that may not be the time to like talk through the details of COBRA, right? Or whatever to say. And so you can say, "I know this is a lot to take in. I wanna talk about the transition plan. I wanna, you know, we wanna do this in the right way. Do you wanna have a follow-up meeting tomorrow to discuss the specifics of all of this?"

Right, so if you get a sense that person needs, if you have, you know, that's not ideal in every situation, but if you have the opportunity to do that, that can be a good way to have that conversation, to just give somebody a chance to take it all in.

And then I think, you know, you can say, I like, I think it's good to thank people. Like, "I really do wanna thank you for everything you've done here." It may sound trite to say that, but it is acknowledging their contribution.

And that's the stuff that can feel scary to say. When again, we're like, I have to get through this

tough thing, but saying those human things. I think are important. And so at the end, you know, "I know you'll have a lot of questions, make a list, we can talk through everything tomorrow."

So again, at every stage of this conversation, we're queuing up what's happening, we're giving the news clearly, we're giving them some choice, like do you wanna discuss this now, the details of a transition, or do you wanna come back tomorrow and talk about it? You're giving them choices about how they wanna have this conversation. And then at the end say, you know, "We'll follow up tomorrow. Is there anything else you wanna talk about now before we end this," right? In this part of the conversation.

So I think that piece about choice, and that choice is also, you know, you have to sort of be tuned in while this conversation is happening, like what this other person may be having a lot going on for them, and you have to sort of be tuned in and make a decision. Like, do we continue to talk about this, or do we? We...you know, does it seem like they need to really take this in first? You need to pause and come back, let them choose, offer it.

Ali:
Mm-hmm. Yeah. It's, you know, having done it in the past where like all the paperwork was done in the moment, including the exit interview. It was rough. It was so rough. I'm glad to say this was decades ago, but it's still like a fresh memory, fresh enough memory how awkward it was because again, nobody prepares for the day they're gonna get shit-canned, you know? And yeah, I think having that choice and making it really clear, we can do this another day or even just staging it that way. Here's the delivery, here's the decision. Let's come back this time or this time and we'll talk about the details of this. Just to give them some space to like decompress. Yeah. Process something. Yeah.

Heather:
I think that's the ideal if that conversation can happen in that way. I mean, look, I've had to fire people as well. And a lot of my examples of what not to do come from things I've done. This either too robotic or too soft, confusing. I just like, you know, it's just tough. And you understand why people will avoid these decisions because it's so uncomfortable for everyone involved.

Because again, when you make the decision to fire somebody, you're choosing to generate a lot of stress for people, for a number of people, primarily for this other person. It's uncomfortable for you and maybe everyone around this. It's hard sometimes to want to do that. It's like, oh, it's a bad week for this. It's tough to want to do that. It's hard, it's hard.

You know, I say to I say to clients a lot, well, this would all be a lot easier if you were a sociopath. Right. Like it would be everything would be easier if you were not easier for the people around you. But, you know, if you don't care how other people feel, you know, if you don't if you don't give a shit about anyone else's feelings and that doesn't matter to you, well, this all gets a lot clearer. Those are people with most humans who have empathy and care. I know so many managers who just care so deeply about getting things right for the people on

their team. And when you care, this all gets a lot more complicated.

Ali:
Yeah.

Heather:
On the flip side, I want to say, you know, I'll go back to what I said earlier about this part about thinking about the needs of the whole, right? And so I think something that can be helpful when a manager really gets in a very painful place about having to do this is like, okay, remember your job, your responsibility is to this entire group of people, not to a single individual, right?

And so, you know, rethinking that responsibility shows that you're not, you know, it may feel like a sense of failure when you have to fire somebody. Like I just haven't been able to get them there, or I haven't been able to make this work, but you are fulfilling your responsibility to the whole group.

Ali:
Yeah, yeah, absolutely. You know, it is personal and but and because of the business like we need to do this thing. And it hurts because there is a personal connection. It hurts or it's just more challenging, right? More stress, more tension.

Heather:
I do an exercise frequently with clients where I'll say, okay, let's just imagine for a minute, you didn't care about anyone's feelings, let's put all that over to the side and just talk to me about like, what's the right makeup of the leadership team or what's the right set of decisions for the business. And I say that to say we don't like we bring those feelings back over. But sometimes those personal feelings about an individual can be so powerful that it makes hard to think clearly about the right structure.

And so sometimes just temporarily thinking, okay, if I didn't care, I'm just gonna pretend for a moment I didn't care, what would I do? And then, okay, now I'm bringing the feelings back in and like think about the right way to do all of this. Can be an exercise.

Ali:
Tricky when you're in a leadership role. Cause work is so people-y.

Heather (48:23.863)
Yeah, it is.

Ali:
Thank you. This was lovely.