LuAnn Heinen:

Among the drivers of employee experience in the workplace, culture is by far the top driver. Every company has one, but what exactly is a corporate culture and how do the day to day emotions that we feel and express at work shape it? There are 135 discrete emotions that can be recognized, and about 40 to 50% are positive. These positive emotions and how their expression and transmission impact an organization is a topic that my guest today, Dr. Mandy O'Neill has studied for the past decade. An Associate Professor of Management at George Mason University and a senior scientist in the school's center for the advancement of well-being, Mandy is an emotional culture scholar whose research shows that companies can benefit from feelings like joy, pride, compassion, and even love. I'm LuAnn Heinen, and this is the Business Group on Health Podcast: conversations with experts on the most relevant health and well-being issues facing employers today. In this episode, I asked Mandy O'Neill why emotional culture matters and how companies can manage it for the good of employees and the business. Mandy, thank you so much for being with us today. Welcome.

Mandy O'Neill:

Thank you for having me.

LuAnn Heinen:

Let's start with what is an emotional culture and how is it different from what we think of as corporate culture?

Mandy O'Neill:

Emotional culture refers to the behavioral norms, artifacts and underlying values that reflect expression, but also suppression of emotions and also the degree to which some emotions are more appropriate than others. So it's different from the way we typically talk about culture, which focuses instead, largely on the cognitive abstract values. So these might be things like excellence or teamwork. And it's really sort of an abstract mental conception of what we think is important and the way to get there, but it leaves out entirely leaves out this affective or emotional side.

LuAnn Heinen:

When we think about corporate culture in the workplace, we're referring to cognitive culture, what's what values are written on the walls.

Mandy O'Neill:

Exactly- what values are written on the walls, what values are in the letters of shareholder, what values are in the badges. And usually they take the form of some acronym, which I think is clever and helps people remember. In fact, when I do culture interviews, one of the things that worries the most wears me the most is when I ask about culture and people get this panicked look, and then they have to look at their badge and say, our values are excellence and teamwork and so on. So yeah, usually that's what we're talking about. But actually I would argue that that isn't is a much more superficial aspect of culture. And there's both, there are two kinds of culture. There's the espoused culture, which is what we would like to be, or what we aspire to be or what we would like the outside world to think of us as, and then there's the inactive culture. And not, everybody's always interested in learning about the inactive culture, but I would argue that that is more important in terms of understanding cultures impact on workplace effectiveness, employee behavior and outcomes that are of interest to managers.

LuAnn Heinen:

And is that the same as emotional culture?

Mandy O'Neill:

Not always. One of the really fun things about studying emotional culture is it actually is not something that a lot of people have thought about until we started bringing it into awareness. So one of the things that happens is that people are so plugged into cognitive culture. In fact, one of my mentors in graduate school did a study in which she found that something like 90% of corporate value statements could be boiled down to something like the same five to seven values, all of which were sort of, you know, you could sort of switch around, but they also the same thing. Again, some variation of like excellence and teamwork and, you know, transparency and ethical and stuff like that. Not the same as emotional culture, which as you mentioned, as we talked about, if we think about what emotions are out there, some researchers have said, and there's, you know, this is not without controversy, that there are somewhere in the range of 135 distinct emotions that can be identified in this case by undergraduates. So when Phil shaver and his colleagues first did this research, they had undergraduates distinguishing emotions and they were able to distinguish among that many emotions. So if you think about that and how many, the infinite number of possibilities about what could constitute the emotional culture and then suddenly have what really is closer to this metaphor of a unique DNA for a person's culture,

LuAnn Heinen:

Why does emotional culture matter? And can you give some examples of its impact inside an organization?

Mandy O'Neill:

So this is the million dollar question, right? I mean, sometimes researchers do studies and they say, who cares anyway? Why does it matter? In fact, when I first started doing this research, my own advisor said, no, I'm not sure emotions really matter. I'm not sure I care about them. So one of the focus of our, one of the, you know, major foci, if you will, of our research in these past 10 years is to demonstrate the impact of culture. So our first study was actually a study of what's called the emotional culture of love. And if you think people haven't thought about emotions in the workplace, they certainly haven't thought about love. So when we were studying this, this was an organization that was already doing fantastic. They were already, you know, matching all of their numbers in the industry. They were, they were knocking out of the park and the CEO invited us in and said, you know, we know we're doing well, but we always think we can do better.

Mandy O'Neill:

So what we were able to demonstrate is that this organization already had a strong culture of love that is caring, compassion, affection. And what we were able to demonstrate there is that the strength of the culture of love within units, because like many cultures, searchers, you know, in our, in our research, we believe culture lives at the unit level or the social unit. Sometimes the department and what we found is that the stronger, the culture of love the lower, the employee burnout, absenteeism, stronger teamwork and greater satisfaction. So sort of all of those employee metrics that we think about and that we're interested in moving the needle on the stronger, the emotional culture, the better those metrics look for from employees. And not only that, I mean, that was pretty neat. And we were excited. We actually measured it longitudinally. So we were able to show some evidence of causality.

Mandy O'Neill:

But what we've found is that not only did it impact the employees, it actually impacted the clients in this case, the patients at the hospital. So we found that the strength of the emotional culture among employees, mind you impacted patient mood, patient satisfaction, patient quality of life. And we found some indicators that it also impacted patient health. So we saw evidence in terms of patient weight, gain fewer trips to the emergency room, which are very costly and desirable to be avoided. And then probably the coolest thing. Well, I mean, so you might say, okay, clients matter, but now what, what if we take it a step further, we actually showed that the strength of culture impacted the patients, family members. So the patient's family members who had relatives in strong cultures of love reported that they were more likely to recommend the hospital and more satisfied with the hospital service when the staff themselves had a strong culture of love, which we thought was just astounding.

LuAnn Heinen:

Connection to business performance. Yeah. That's of great interest. What are the hallmarks of a culture of love? How did you peg it as that kind of a culture?

Mandy O'Neill:

Absolutely. So in thinking about culture, we do like to think about it in terms of levels. So one of the things we don't want to do is make the mistake of thinking that just because the company has a logo, just because it has a motto, just because it has, you know, a plaque on the wall that doesn't necessarily mean a culture that can be an indicator, but we typically think of that as a cultural artifact. So when I come into an organization, I'm always looking first and foremost for the artifacts. So I look around and I see what are the, you know, what are the badges? What are the flyers, but also what is the humor? So sometimes you can tell a lot about the hidden assumptions are about, you know, what employees find particularly frustrating or get a lot of joy out of, by looking at sort of the artifacts around, in terms of, you know, what do they have hanging up on their walls?

Mandy O'Neill:

You can even tell something about, do they have pictures of each other? One of the things I love to see in organizations is pictures of employees having fun together, inside and outside of the workplace. So that's one of the sort of indicators I look for, but that's just the most, you know, in some ways the most superficial level, the reflects the underlying dimensions. So the hallmarks of a culture of love are for example, people who know each other well, who care about each other and who really display this, caring, this affection, this tenderness. Some people call it comradery every day up and down the organization and not just the one person, but they actually express it to a lot of people. And by the way, this is not to say that you necessarily, you know, you love everybody, but the idea is there's this sort of interpersonal knowledge and this closeness among people that's reflected in the way they interact and specifically in the way they express emotions to each other.

Mandy O'Neill:

One of the things we first started thinking about was, you know, how has this, how do feelings relate to expressions? And what we realized is you can't always have access to your own emotions, much less the emotions of other people internally, but when you can access as the way that they express it to each other, and you can access the extent to which you yourself are suppressing some emotions or allowing them to freely come out. So sometimes the emotions that are very taboo, the ones that are not allowed to be expressed or clue about the emotional culture. And then again, if we think about that metaphor in

terms of like the levels of going deeper, what we're looking for too, are the deep underlying assumptions, which are sometimes reflected in the norms. That is the behaviors, the rituals, the things that go on a regular basis and are somewhat predictable, but some of the taken for granted aspect and that, that usually comes out when an assumption is violated.

Mandy O'Neill:

So one of my favorite stories about this was working with organization, where they had a real, you know, really strong culture of love. This was a large public utility, and they had a culture in which they really used the word family, and they meant it. Meaning there were not a lot of firings. People tended to stay with this company for life. They had a great deal of affection for each other and for their leaders. And they brought a new leader into the company and he was very different. And one of the things that happened, one of the first things he did is he stood up and he said, you are not my family. My family is at home. And this was such a violation of the underlying assumptions of this culture that it rippled through the employees. It ended up predicting the downfall of this leader and this story I might add, this holds me years after the leader was gone. Because again, it was such a fundamental violation of the deep, underlying assumptions.

LuAnn Heinen:

So let's pivot to signs of a bad culture. And it looks like that you were starting to get there, but if you walked in the door of a company, what, what might you notice that would tell you this has a more negative culture?

Mandy O'Neill:

I tend to be of the opinion that, you know, I, that sort of a social functional approach, or sounds like a lot of words, but what it means is essentially that it's not necessarily like in the natural world and the, in a Darwinian world, something that was not adaptive would essentially be weeded out. It wouldn't exist anymore. The thing about cultures is that you can actually have cultures that I would not describe as being the most positive, but interestingly, they don't get weeded out. So you can have some pretty dysfunctional cultures and the organization is still hanging in there. And now sometimes they're hanging in there by a shoestring. But I think one of the most obvious aspects of this culture is one that is not necessarily defined by emotions as much as it's defined by the absence of some emotions. And then I would add some particular emotions, the presence of, so when you think about the opposite of a culture of love, for example, it's not necessarily, some people automatically would think, Oh, that must be a culture of anger.

Mandy O'Neill:

No, it turns out that Elie Wiesel was right when he said that the opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. So in a culture that has a really weak culture of love, what you see is just really indifference. You see people who really have no connection to each other whatsoever, and it ends up, they're just very disconnected altogether. Now one of the things that is a hallmark of a truly dysfunctional culture is not necessarily anger. You might think like, Oh, angry employees, frustrated employees, frankly. It takes me about three seconds to do interviews with employees before somebody starts talking about what they find frustrating. So I don't necessarily think that is however, what I would say that's truly dysfunctional is contempt. And, and this is an emotion that doesn't come to come from my own work, as much as it comes from the work of John Gottman who did work in marital therapy.

Mandy O'Neill:

So he found the contempt was an emotion that was really one of the most that people could have an interpersonal relationships. And I would say the same is true for organizations. So contempt is an emotion that is absolutely the hallmark and it's within the anger family. So sometimes they'll see, you know, I actually, my first study I ever did was a large retail organization where they had such a strong culture of anger that it ended up resulting in employee sabotage. So people were actively hurting the organization, they were destroying merchandise and property. So the sort of like this idea of shrinkage, they're measuring very high levels of shrinkage having to do with the strong culture of anger in that organization. So that brings up a second point, which is not to say that it's an exact type of emotion. Or though again, I point out contempt as being one of the real problematic emotions for culture, but sometimes it's the intensity and pervasiveness of an emotion.

Mandy O'Neill:

And so in this case, the anger was so intense and so pervasive, and it wasn't counteracted with another emotion. So to give you an example, my colleagues and I have a study on culture of anxiety. And what we found is that in general, if you were just to look at anxiety, it tends to have negative outcomes. So it tends to predict burnout, defensive, predictable satisfaction. It has a negative impact on these indicators that we're interested in. But what we found is that anxiety didn't live alone. It was actually paired with another emotion: love. And what we found there is that the extent to which anxiety was really problematic had to do with how strong or weak the culture of love was. So to answer your question about a bad culture, I would say it's the strength of some of these really problematic negative emotions without the pairing of positive emotions that help counteract it helps soften it, or that actually can turn it into functional. So for example, anger being used for purposes of, you know, social justice is a very good emotion indeed.

LuAnn Heinen:

Is there a way to diagnose the company's emotional culture?

Mandy O'Neill:

Absolutely. There are so many ways. The most common one is to do employee surveys, but one of the challenges with that is survey fatigue. So every time I ask my MBA students, you know, do you get these kinds of surveys? They roll their eyes and they say, yes, yes, yes. And I say, no, no, but you haven't gotten this kind. But honestly it all blends together. So while surveys are really effective for getting a large group of employees together, there are other ways, you know, potentially more unobtrusive ways that are useful as well. I tend to find that trained readers are extraordinarily helpful. So these might be people who are insider outsiders. They know the people, they know the organization, but they also have enough of a perspective to recognize differences between for example, departments or social units.

Mandy O'Neill:

We do have this tendency to have the fish and water effect, which is, we can't really necessarily recognize things. If we've never been outside of that culture, we don't have a comparison. And I do find that supervisors tend to have a pretty good sense of the emotions that they're seeing around them. So my, my study of firefighters showed that the battalion chiefs who were, you know, referred to as like a parent to a lot of the firefighters, were able to diagnose the culture and then, you know, to connect the behaviors that they saw taking place, which by the way, were very different behaviors than I saw as an onsite research assistant, but were comparable with some of my observations. They were linked to all

sorts of important outcomes. So having people inside the organization, I think partnering with someone outside the organization is very helpful. And to the extent, whenever possible to use unintrusive observations, to try to catch people behaving naturally. So one of the ways I've done this as I had a team of insider outsiders come into organizations and, you know, just hang out, they had another purpose. So every 20 minutes when they were on a unit, they would report on what they observed in terms of what emotions they saw naturally being expressed. And they did that every time. So we were able to generate just a really realistic rich samples. Now, of course, the question that comes with that is how do you scale, how do you do that?

Mandy O'Neill:

And I think that some of our technology is really allowing us to do that in a very interesting way. So there are some companies who are very open, very transparent, who might be comfortable, for example, with having like 3D cameras where researchers could use the observations, you know, again, not just what they see express verbally, but just sort of like verbal tone, not only behavior and really capture that and use that in a very comprehensive way, which allows for a lot, a lot, a lot of data. So this is something that's more easily scalable. And then, you know, again, worst case scenario, there are always surveys, but I think what it requires is a little education about what are these different emotions. People see emotions sometimes and they say, I have no idea what these means. So really educating employees on what emotions are and what they look like.

LuAnn Heinen:

So let's talk about deliberate and by default culture, do we know whether, if you see a positive culture, is that highly likely to be cultivated and deliberately maintained?

Mandy O'Neill:

Yeah, this is a great question. One of the things I have observed is that because emotional culture is so new of a construct, people don't pay attention to it as much as they should. And what happens as a result is that sometimes people do, it's kind of like a garden. If you just sort of let the garden grow without really cultivating it or tending to it at all. I mean, you might have some beautiful flowers in there, but you're probably going to have a lot of weeds. And then at some point it's going to grow out of control. And so the same thing happens with culture. So to the extent to which people are not paying attention to it are not activated actively cultivating. You get these cultures that are really a product of the people and the time and the growth in the organization, where it is its lifespan. And I would say that especially in smaller organizations, it tends to be a strong reflection of the leadership that's there and the people who are there. So research shows that top management does have an influence on culture and left to their own devices. That's going to have a very strong influence, especially in smaller organizations.

LuAnn Heinen:

To go back to the garden metaphor. Let's just clarify the weeds that we're talking about that we might need to pull at- are those behaviors or those people?

Mandy O'Neill:

Well, Oh, this is a great question. Who are the weeds in my garden metaphor? So sometimes it's emotion. Like I said, there are some emotions where, you know, they creep in and they, they really are so problematic. We might need to tend them down. We might need to reign them in unit. We might

need to put some fertilizer in them or, or allow them to grow in the beautiful or they need to. And sometimes it is people. So it is absolutely the case that negative is stronger than positive. This is research that has gone out in the past 30, 40 years. And so it can, you can have a person or a group of people who can really have a destructive effect on culture. And one of the ways that this gets really problematic is when these people are either leadership or their top performers.

Mandy O'Neill:

So I've worked with several organizations where they say, Oh, this person, he's a jerk, but he's a brilliant jerk. You know, we really need to have them around. And so how do you deal with those brilliant jerks reflects a lot, both about them, about your culture and about how you're going to manage your culture when you see the influence of this person's behaviors. So it's both the person and their behavior. I personally subscribe to a belief that, you know, people are very influenced by situations. So it's unlikely that people are just, you know, all bad or all good, but there are, you know, in person-situation interactions when the culture or the norms, you know, particular can enable certain types of emotions and certain types of behaviors to be really destructive when they come out. And people, especially people who are powerful, people who are part performers and so on.

LuAnn Heinen:

So leadership's important, but it sounds like we're all gardeners in our, in our garden, in our culture. What are some ways that individuals, team leaders and others can create a positive culture?

Mandy O'Neill:

This is a great point. And one of the true aspects of cultural searches, we tend to spend an awful lot of time focusing on leaders and focusing on CEOs in particular as if they're the only people that are able to cultivate and maintain and manage cultures. But it turns out that at every level of the organization, people can have an influence. So I would say that actually, especially in larger organizations, the CEO or top leadership, one of the main cultural drivers is by providing the resources to maintain and manage culture. So they certainly have a symbolic mechanism and symbols matter, I've worked with organizations where people said, you know, what really mattered to me? It really mattered to me that the CEO asked me, how are you when he saw me in the hallway? And he did so in a sincere way, or it really mattered that the CEO sent Thanksgiving message.

Mandy O'Neill:

She was so authentic. She was so genuine. I really felt like she was speaking to me. So this is not to underestimate this symbolic emphasis that CEOs and top management can have, but I think that one of their primary roles is in providing those resources. So what really matters is actually the group that I think has received the least amount of attention and training is middle managers, because middle managers are in this fantastic position where they're not only managing people, but they're also managing upwards. So they're managing the higher levels. And in response, they both have an impact on the people below them, but they also have the impact of people at their level, and they have a people and they have an impact above. So if I were to put my emphasis in terms of where training should be, it would be at that level.

Mandy O'Neill:

And then the second level I would say is human resources and organizational development departments, the people department, so to speak, we cannot underestimate the importance of

gatekeepers in terms of who we bring into the culture. And one of the very practical ways we can worry about this is what is our process for selecting people? And then what is our process for socializing them? So we bring in people and we can do we ever put in our, in our interview questions, questions about what they would contribute or detract from the emotional culture. So this is something that HR, and to the extent to which HR is working with the managers and the groups that are hiring them, this is, these are ways in which we can really create and maintain that culture by who gets into the culture. And then in particular, the socialization people are very sensitive to the organizational norms in the beginning.

Mandy O'Neill:

So most organizations spend maybe like, I don't know, half day or a day socializing, you know, it's sort of a video training or whatever, but how are we socializing people to be what we want to be, you know, in our best self, so to speak and make sure that some behaviors, you know, this gets to the opposite side of how our behaviors monitored when they suddenly get into a situation where they're not the kind of that we want to create. And then last, I'll say the question I get a lot is about individual contributors. You know, how can I create and maintain a culture if I'm not managing anybody? And so that, I would say one of the really amazing aspects of emotional culture is that at the root of it is a process called the emotion contagion. So this is the idea that we non-consciously catch emotions from others.

Mandy O'Neill:

And it's sometimes more deliberate as well. So emotional contagion is non-conscious. So you just simply, you know, being someone who exudes, caring, and compassion, or somebody who brings a level of awe and curiosity, or somebody who is, you know, feeling a lot of gratitude, you know, there there's evidence to suggest that people will catch that as well as by the way, the negative emotions. So if you're somebody who exudes anxiety or anger people, are going to catch those as well. Sometimes, you know, more clearly, but what are the specific actions that you can do to spread emotional culture laterally? So one of, one of my favorite examples of this is, is actually managing upwards. Bosses need support too. So in a strong culture of love, you may know that your boss is a tea person. I was on a, I was on a call the other day where one person was a tea person. One person was a coffee person, one person's a Red Bull person. So let's say, you know this about somebody, you know, maybe you bring them a little cup of tea, a little note and say, you're doing a great job. These are, these are kind of small acts of kindness that everyone can do at every level, including individual contributors.

LuAnn Heinen:

So going back to, when you talked about the role of HR and O.D. and gatekeepers of the organizational culture, when, when hiring and onboarding, it seems like, sharing practices, like we tend to be, you know, we're very, we're very positive around here. We encourage people to take their vacation. We, you know, want to be sure there's a balance in everyone's life or whatever those kinds of messages are that could have an impact. I think you're saying, and you've also talked about "fake it till you make it", where if you're just not feeling it on a certain day, you can still go through the motions of feeling positive and that has an impact, and it's better than letting your negative emotions out.

Mandy O'Neill:

Well, there's two sides to the "fake it till you make it". So one is that absolutely we can change our emotions, thank eating and behaviors. You know, there's some evidence, the facial feedback hypothesis suggests that you can actually change your emotion by changing your facial muscles. Again, some of this is very early research, but I think, I think it still stands. And there's some evidence about that where

recently, you know, work on power posing. And so on that we can, we can change how we feel through our bodily movements. And so in this case power poses, but I think that the flip side of that is that when we sometimes cover up our emotions, you know, when we put a lid on them, it can also create a situation in which we're suppressing emotions, which has a negative impact on our health and our well-being and our interactions with others.

Mandy O'Neill:

So it's a fine line between, you know, "fake it till you make it" and, you know, put on a smile on your face, which can, and back sometimes, um, you know, amplify your positive emotions and then being careful to just put a lid on, not to put a lid on it so that we're not actually suppressing emotions, which we think we might not be showing, but the research shows that we actually, they leak out, we do show them and it impacts like our working memory. For example, our interactions with others, our longterm memory. So these are things we want to be careful for making sure we're not faking it so much that we're just putting a lid on all the emotions that we think are negative or that we don't want to show.

LuAnn Heinen:

Okay. So be authentic, but be aware that you may transmit whatever negative emotions you're feeling.

Mandy O'Neill:

Or positive. I mean, so for example, you know, you get that promotion that one of the, one of the emotions that's really taken off in the research is envy. So, you know, you're feeling envy because your best friend got that promotion and you didn't, you know, how are you hiding your joy? If you're the person who got the promotion so that you don't make people feel bad or in some or tediously, how are you hiding your envy? I think that we, we actually have a lot of control over the emotions we feel, to give you an example, some, one of my colleagues and I are doing some research on gratitude as emotion regulation. And so the example that I like to give is when you're feeling really angry at one of your colleagues and you really just, you feel like you're going to blow, how do we channel that anger?

Mandy O'Neill:

How do we reframe it? It turns out gratitude is really useful. You sit down and you say, okay, let me do. What's called the mental subtraction exercise. And let me think about it. If I didn't have this person in my life, let me think about all the good things that have come from my relationship with this person, the small things I may be grateful for. And it turns out that that actually reduces the experience of anger that we have with that person. So we can do, we can do some work ourselves in terms of reframing or, you know, decreasing some negative emotions that, you know, let's be honest. It might not be so helpful to just go around exploding at your colleagues. I mean, you may in fact have a culture of extreme emotional expressivity, but you know, sometimes it's very shocking and scary to have someone just yelling at you. And especially if that person is a supervisor.

LuAnn Heinen:

Yeah, no mental subtraction. I like that. It does seem logical that the well-being programs so many companies offer should support a positive emotional culture. Is there any evidence that mindfulness, resilience, sleep, gratitude programs, make a difference in culture?

Mandy O'Neill:

Absolutely. This is some of the most exciting, and I must say, new research coming out of management is the impact of mindfulness and sleep training and resilience training and this sort of thing on workplace behavior. I mean, some of it sounds so obvious. So if I were to tell my grandmother, you know, "Hey, you know, guess what sleep makes you more productive and makes you better concentrate?" She would say, "no, duh", but it turns out that we need research to demonstrate this. And in some cases we need to justify it. It's competing goals around productivity. So it's very, you know, it's sort of counter-intuitive to think that to be more productive, to get more work done, you actually need to sleep more. But we're thinking about the quality of work there. And with mindfulness in particular, we're thinking about how we can regulate some of the negative influences in our life to be able to concentrate more, to be more in the presence, to sort of also calm and quiet, some of the anxieties that inevitably creep up and work life. Nevermore so now in the pandemic that we've been experiencing in 2020, you know, how do we calm and quiet? Some of those anxieties to really be in the present. Mindfulness is extraordinarily helpful for that.

LuAnn Heinen:

Well, I want to switch gears and follow that lead and talk about the perils of our current reality, the negativity that let's be candid, all of us feel from time to time this year, you've talked about hostile attribution, emotional regulation over Zoom. What are the perils of this time and how can we mitigate it?

Mandy O'Neill:

One of my favorite studies in graduate school was a study of cog-, and this was by the way, you know, when, before the pandemic. And so it's just a general rule, but it was this research where they found that we tend to attribute motives to things all the time. So we're always trying to understand others' behaviors. And when it comes over email, we have this hostile attribution bias. We tend to interpret things more hostily than we would if it was in person. And then if it was something else instead of email. So be careful what we read over email, because the, you know, the tendency is for us to make, you know, hostile attributions. So you might want to take the extra time to just, you know, we're always trying to get their inbox as quickly as possible. And these, these movements towards zero inbox, or, you know, making that pressure would stop her, but, but really think about what it is we're trying to communicate there.

Mandy O'Neill:

What is the tone of our email? One of the areas of research that I think is most exciting is around emoji actually. So what are these little, you know, do we need to rely on nonverbal behaviors that we would use in person a little more online to communicate tone? There is some research on that just coming out, actually, in terms of how, how do these emojis help communicate and manage emotions? Interestingly, some of the work that's taking place at major corporations is working with emotion researchers. So Dacher Keltner, for example, at U Berkeley has worked on, has collaborated with companies like Facebook and others to come up with emojis that can better reflect our emotions. And this is a good thing, because again, if we're trying to communicate as effectively as possible, we can use emotions to help with that. And of course, the question now on everybody's mind is around, you know, web platforms like Zoom or WebEx or collaborate or Google, like how do we actually effectively in that meetings and connect to their peers when there's always this question of video on video off, you know, recently very recently I just saw some new data come out, but it turns out that the tone of voice might actually be more impactful in terms of communicating emotion, even than facial expressions, which I

think is a great relief to people who were struggling about, you know, do I have to put the video on, it's just, it's a lot of work to engage in that kind of emotion regulation, and then you see yourself there too.

Mandy O'Neill:

So usually we're not seeing our own facial expressions, now suddenly we are. We are trying to manage our own facial expressions, trying to pay attention to others. It serves a form of cognitive load. So what this new data may be showing is, you know, take a break, turn the video off tone of voice matters. And I would say, you know, use those emoji effectively as well.

LuAnn Heinen:

That's great. Yeah. We have colleagues on staff who, who say I'm taking a Zoom holiday or a video holiday and just dial it in.

Mandy O'Neill:

Yeah, exactly. I understand that there's nothing more intense than having two, you know, emotions and emotional culture researchers on Zoom together. Interestingly, we always turn the video off, I think for all the reasons I just described.

LuAnn Heinen:

But I like seeing others, I'd rather be off and watch everyone else. I think we're all, we're all like that. Do you have a sense of whether emotional cultures are suffering in these times due to our decreased connectedness?

Mandy O'Neill:

Yeah. There was some research before the pandemic on this epidemic of loneliness in the workplace. And I think that it's, you know, one thing that was happening is as people started to work more from home, the people who were in the office were feeling a little lonely. Now, what, what has happened during the pandemic is we had a mass exodus of people. And I think that, yeah, it's hard to keep these bonds and connectivity unless we make deliberate concerted attempts again, to manage the culture. So I think when people are just left alone and there's no connection, you know, those fabrics of interpersonal connection are likely to wither a little bit. So making more deliberate at times, you know, one of the things my department does for example, is we have these weekly lunches. We actually realized it was one of the most awkward things on Zoom was eating lunch.

Mandy O'Neill:

So as if it's not bad enough watching things going into other people's mouths, you know, watching things way too much. So we ended up making it like an afternoon event, but, you know, it's a way to just connect and check in with each other, you know, sort of virtually. And I think that answers the question too, of how we can potentially do this with colleagues who are remote even after the pandemic ends. So, you know, a lot of corporations have employees in all parts of the country and in a lot of cases globally, how do we connect with people? I think this is one really obvious thing that we can do to connect with them is you mean, we perfect the rituals now when we've got the time and when everybody's kind of forced to do it so we can then take best practices back, including what that means for the workplace and how we can mitigate loneliness both inside the workplace or when we're geographically distributed.

LuAnn Heinen:

You also mentioned that when everyone's remote, there's less opportunity for the "little repairs to relationships" that can happen. So naturally when we bump each other at the water cooler or the break room.

Mandy O'Neill:

Yeah. There's, there's this idea that, you know, sometimes gaps are things that are, you know, gas are hard to repair in general, but graphs are especially hard to repair when you have a limited connection points. So maybe you have an hour and you were sort of rude to somebody and it had nothing to do with somebody else. And then you're not going to see them again. And the next, you know, weekly, monthly, whatever it is check-in. So I think this is where over-communicating is helpful. So, you know, "Hey, I'm sorry, I was grumpy today" and actually has a great opportunity to show caring and compassion. So I'm one of the most caring, compassionate things a colleague did for me lately is I was completely distracted with else, nothing having to do with work. So I was a little quiet on the call and after the call, a person sent me a text and said, "Hey, is everything okay? You seem a little quiet today". So I think that taking that extra step that maybe we wouldn't have had to take before, because we'd have a chance to have a nice interaction. It wasn't necessarily like you even have to say anything, the repair would just take place, you know, with the person being a little friendly or doing a nice gesture, we need to now make an extra concerted effort to do that. And to be thinking about, you know, how are other people doing? How can we check in with them either more frequently? Or how can we reach out if perhaps, you know, some sort of interpersonal gaffe or, you know, a little, you know, relational incident occurred that needs to be repaired?

LuAnn Heinen:

So helpful, just continuing on that theme. Are there any other tips and tricks for reading culture remotely or maintaining a positive emotional culture in our current reality?

Mandy O'Neill:

Yeah. I think that everybody, you know, everybody's afraid of being the so-called BBC that right, the person who's there and, you know, the kid bops in the meeting, especially those of us that have our camera pointing right at our door and do have children. But I actually think it's one of these opportunities to really embrace what is the core of an emotional culture of love, which is closeness. So one of the principles of closeness that comes from psychological research is mutual vulnerability. So I think that being on Zoom and having a window into people's lives, including their lives outside of work enables a closeness that might not have been bent that might not have been able to achieve before. Especially if it's an office where people don't really bring their whole selves to work, or for some people it's uncomfortable to bring up their whole self.

Mandy O'Neill:

I think this is an area in which it allows a lot more closeness. And you know, one of the exercises that I'll sometimes do to create a culture of love is this exercise. This, Aaron and colleagues have had developed, which is 36 questions to fall in love. Well, I've modified it a little so that you don't actually want to fall in love in the romantic sense, but you want to fall in companionate love. So you can sort of have this as an exercise. You can even have it as a ritual to get to know each other well, in addition to the accidental sort of adorable things that happen when you're peeking into people's lives, you know, getting to know

their families outside of work, getting to know their workspace, getting to see people in their home environment. I think it allows for a vulnerability that naturally and genders closeness.

LuAnn Heinen:

I love that. Yeah, kids, pets, 36 questions to fall into companionate love.

LuAnn Heinen:

Well, let's end on a positive note. If we want to extend and spread positive culture in our own organizations, what are one or two things we could do today to make a difference?

Mandy O'Neill:

We talked about getting to know your, colleagues. Getting to know people, you know, and also respecting boundaries, there are some people who really do want to keep up the boundaries is one thing that we can do. This is gonna sound something very COVID friendly, but go for a walk, go for a walk in the woods with a colleague. One of the emotions that I've gotten really interested in lately is awe. And it dovetails with the research that shows that being in nature for 20 minutes a day can improve your mood and well-being. So, you know, if you have the, if you're fortunate enough to have colleagues nearby, you know, go for a walk with them in the woods and see if you can experience that feeling of awe, which, you know, again, I'm just starting to do this research now, but really seems to be related to connecting to something bigger than oneself, which may be the organization, maybe the relationship, but maybe just the world, but if nothing else generates positive emotions.

Mandy O'Neill:

And then there are some tried and true tactics, like I'm working with an organization that has just a really strong culture of gratitude at every level of the organization. So they have little notes that they send each other little kudos notes. And I actually took, took my own advice today. And I sent to kudos note to a colleague. And actually I sent it to his supervisor just to say, Hey, you know what, this person's amazing. I'm so grateful to have him as a colleague. I just wanted to pass it along. And so I think these are little things that we can do pandemic or no pandemic to really start to, to generate and cultivate the positive emotions that can create the core of a truly positive emotional culture. And not one that pretends that negative emotions don't exist, but acknowledge them and manage them and incorporate them into the fabric of emotional life.

LuAnn Heinen:

I've been speaking with dr. Mandy O'Neill of George Mason University about emotional culture, its impact on our organizations and ways we can improve it. I'm LuAnn Heinen, and this is the Business Group on Health Podcast: conversations with experts on the most relevant health and well-being issues facing employers today.