

SHOW NAME: *Hiring to Firing: The Podcast*

EPISODE TITLE: *What Can the Show Severance Teach Us About Work-Life Balance?*

HOST NAME: *Tracey Diamond, Evan Gibbs*

GUEST NAME: *Debbie Epstein Henry*

[TRACEY DIAMOND]

Welcome to *Hiring to Firing: The Podcast*. I'm Tracey Diamond, a Labor and Employment attorney with the law firm of Troutman Pepper. Today, my partner, Evan Gibbs and I welcome our guest, Debbie Epstein Henry. Debbie is a best-selling author, public speaker and consultant. She also hosts the podcast *Inspiration Loves Company* where she explores how to do better and be better at life, work, and everything in between. Welcome and thanks so much for joining us, Debbie.

[DEBBIE EPSTEIN HENRY]

Oh, thank you, Tracey. It's so great to back in touch and so delighted to be here today with you and Evan.

[TRACEY DIAMOND]

So Debbie, tell us a little bit about your podcast. What was the inspiration behind it and what topics have you explored so far?

[DEBBIE EPSTEIN HENRY]

I launched *Inspiration Loves Company* in October of 2020 and I had actually been wanting to launch a podcast for probably about five years but, due to my speaking, I was regularly traveling and suddenly, of course, all of us stopped traveling as of March 2020, and I felt like I had a little bit more room to really explore the podcast. I also felt there was a real need for more conversation that intersects three aspects of our lives. Essentially, the professional, personal and community. And that's really what I try to do on the podcast is interview different *New York Times* best-selling authors and thought leaders and TED speakers about this intersection of our lives and really delving in deep to each of these aspects. So we've covered topics like women and careers and happiness and leadership and race and bias and candor and courage and all those sorts of topics that you talk often with your family or close friends about but you don't really delve into with the context of professional and community ideas as well. So that, that's really the idea.

[TRACEY DIAMOND]

It sounds fabulous. And it's a perfect subject for today's topic. Today we're going to focus on Apple tv's new show called *Severance*. Which is a trippy sci-fi series. The show tells the story of a group of employees who have agreed to undergo a surgical procedure that renders them unable to remember anything about their personal lives when they're at work and also unable to remember anything about their work lives when they're home. Their brains are "severed" so to speak. Let's take a listen:

"I mean, I wish I could do it. I'd just always be thinking about, you know, the other one.

Well, there is no other one. It's me. I do the job.

I just don't grasp the visceral element. What does it feel like?

Well, it's simple. One's memories are bifurcated so when you're not at work, you have no recollection of what it is you do there. Did I get that right Mark?

Well,

So, you walk in at 9:00 am, and then suddenly it's 5 and you're leaving.

Well, they stagger us a little so

They stagger

And then, conversely, when you're at work, you can't access outside memories. So, in effect, that version of you is trapped there.

Well,

I mean not trapped,

Yeah,

But what?"

So, one could say that this is the ultimate work/life balance. There's a lot to unpack here, but what struck me the most was how unhappy both the innies, you know the employee when the employee's at work, and the outies, those who are not at work or the same employee when they're not at work, how unhappy they were. The innies seemed to be stuck in this mind-numbing spiral of meaningless computer work while the outies appear to live in a cold, dark, isolating world. In real life, is there a way to strike the right amount of work/life balance to find happiness, both in your inner self and your outer self?

[DEBBIE EPSTEIN HENRY]

So, obviously, it's a big question and it's something I think so many of us scrapple with every day. And the first time I really started homing in on this issue was back in '99 and I was trying to play an integral role in my kids' lives and also be on partnership track, like you Tracey. And I sent an email to you in 1999 and five other people and said I want to start talking about work/life issues. And within a few days 150 people emailed me back in response. And the reason why I mention that is that's really how I stopped practicing law and started getting into public speaking on the work/life front and then many other topics. And through that first email, and then the response, and then a growing network of 10,000+ lawyers, I started getting what I called the "Dear Debbie" emails. And in those emails, I started hearing from lawyers around the country about what happiness looks like and what work/life balance looks like. And through that wonderful feedback from the lawyer community, I've homed in on what I think are five aspects of work/life balance that leads to happiness. And I'll share with you them and they won't surprise you, of course. First is around hours and people are just a lot of

their happiness is how much time they're spending doing the work and how much they're spending in all the other things that are meaningful to them. And so, looking at hours is a huge piece of it. Second is around flexibility. I find actually a lot of people who love their work, work a lot of hours, but they want flexibility in the way in which they work. And that can be very closely aligned with happiness. Third is around control. I actually find with high-intense jobs, this issue around predictability and control is particularly challenging and can lead to a lot of dissatisfaction at work when you don't have control to be able to pick up your kids after work. Or spend the time you want playing guitar or whatever it may be. Fourth is around availability. And I think this issue of being on-call, again, particularly for high-intensity jobs, this notion of never being able to be off-call, maybe not even being able to take vacation or having to go to the ends of the earth to have a place where you are where's there's not good cell service and the problem is the technology's gotten so good, we've got to figure it out some other way. And the fifth aspect is around location. And maybe it's proximity to a childcare center or proximity to elder care where you're working, or, you know, this issue around location has become less relevant, actually, in the pandemic, because a lot of us have more control about where we're working. But these five aspects of hours, flexibility, control, availability, and location, to me, are really the key levers in evaluating what makes a happy person when they're managing the challenges of both work and their demands outside of work.

[TRACEY DIAMOND]

You've done a really good job of articulating and breaking down sort of these different components of happiness and, you know, when I think about all of those different aspects of what makes somebody feel fulfilled and happy in their job, it strikes me that looking back on our initial conversations all those many years ago, unfortunately, not all that much has changed. And I'm curious Evan, you know, to get the sort of male viewpoint here of, you know, what are your thoughts about Debbie's five points of happiness and how that fits into your career development as a guy?

[EVAN GIBBS]

Oh, I'll tell you. I think that there is a, and again this is just my opinion, but I think there is a generational divide, or a generational split if you will. The men lawyers that I grew sort of working under, their experience was very different from mine. You know, they're I think, without exception, I think their wives worked exclusively in the home and they did their lawyer job and they didn't do nearly as much at home, they weren't involved with, you know, picking up from daycare and doing laundry and things like that. And for me, and for other lawyers my age, you know, our wives work outside the home as well. And with that, for me, it's only fair that, you know, we're splitting the responsibility. You know, it's not fair for my wife to work outside the home and then for her to bear all the child-rearing responsibilities and housework and all that stuff. And I think that for me, having those responsibilities, those shared responsibilities for me, has made flexibility around my work schedule just absolutely necessary. I mean, there's just, I would not do this job if I didn't have the flexibility to come and go when I needed to. And for me, I can say that the pandemic came personally in the changes it wrought, came at the perfect time for me cause we had our first child right when the pandemic started. And so, I never had to juggle, you know, childcare and in-person, full-time in-person office work personally. And I can't imagine doing that quite frankly. You know, now, I'm so used to working from home and having the flexibility that it's really worked out

well for me and I actually really enjoy it. I'm actually, I love what I do and I really enjoy the sort of integration. To me, what's changed and what's most important about what you said, the way I take it personally, is the integration between work and home life where now I don't have to feel like work always takes priority 9 to 5. I feel like my work life and my home life are now balanced in priority. You know, if I've got something, if I've got a really important appointment, I will push a client call. I will say, I can't talk to you at 9:00, you know, I already have an engagement. And it may be that I'm taking my car to get the oil changed, it might not be a work thing. And to me, that has made me immeasurably more satisfied with my job, being able to have that flexibility.

[DEBBIE EPSTEIN HENRY]

It's so great to hear both the male and a perspective from somebody who is of a generation that's different from Tracey and mine. And this is part of the success of changing the conversation around work/life balance is can we move it away from being a mommy issue. You know, take the gender out. And the other aspect is effective change around work/life balance is moving it away from being an issues that relates solely to parenting. Because what historically was the problem was that, you know, then anybody who didn't have kids was sort of dumped on for everything else and it bred a lot of resentment. But the third aspect which you spoke to Evan is this issue about integration. That it's not a work/life balance that's so artificial to separate the two, our lives are inextricably linked. It's like when you hear somebody saying well Facebook is for your personal life and LinkedIn is professional. As if we don't have people who cross over, of course, and it's, those boundaries don't exist. You referenced the pandemic, of course, and I think one of the things that's been so interesting is we've had entre into our colleagues lives in a way that we never would have otherwise and it's brought and intimacy and a more personal connection to our work relationships, even though in some respect they feel more estranged because we don't have the in-person contact, we have a lot of entre. And if we don't use that opportunity to build more trust when we're in our client's and our colleague's homes, it's an opportunity lost. But I think the other aspect of what's changed over the past two years and why I think work has gotten so much more personal and it should is in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, really this notion of personal leadership has become much more of an expectation and there's been an expectation that leaders bring in their personal lives in order to connect more effectively and to communicate more effectively with their colleagues. I remember shortly after George Floyd's murder, that there was a piece in the *Wall Street Journal* about how black executives were being invited to tell their personal stories for the first time. And how powerful that was and how that is long overdue, but also an opportunity to build more strong relationships among colleagues. And that's part of this discussion as well.

[EVAN GIBBS]

Before the pandemic, I usually felt like, there was a very clear sort of wall between work life and personal life. And you just, unless you knew the person really well, you didn't really delve into that. And now it just all sort of bleeds over. You know, you're talking to people at soccer games and kids are coming through and you just, man, you learn so much more about people. And to me it's been just a really positive thing. And I don't feel like it's severance where we really have this hard line between work life and home life. I feel like it's a much blurrier line, if it exists, you know, much at all. And people, to me, that's created a lot of empathy. I think that's the thing that I've seen the most is you really kind of come to have

more, at least for me, have more realistic expectations you know, about people's time, and what they're doing and what their other commitments are. I don't know, I think that's been a big thing that I've notice. Not just for myself, but for others. It seems like people have become more empathetic to well, you've got some crazy stuff going on in your life, maybe this deadline isn't that important or we can move it around or whatever.

[TRACEY DIAMOND]

It's been an equalizer from a gender perspective in terms of its all of us now that are working at home. Some of us, well, you know, I do want to make the caveat that of course, we're talking about office jobs where there has been a work-at-home component. There are many workers across the country that did not have that luxury of being able to work at home. But in this segment of the population, it has equalized, you know, where it used to be sort of the part-time worker that may be working at home or may be only working in the office certain days of the week and not working at all the other days. Whereas now, its most everybody in that job segment that is doing that. But it also has that reverse effect of employees feeling like they're always working. I don't know about you guys, but I feel like, yeah I might be able to take that appointment in the middle of the day, but I'm working much later into the night that I did previously. Because there's really no sort of difference between work and home, it all bleeds together.

[DEBBIE EPSTEIN HENRY]

Tracey, you're absolutely right. And that's something that I hear in my conversations every day is one of the things people miss the most about being in the office are those natural transitions in the day that we all took for granted. Part of it is commuting to the office and that sort of thing. But other things like those casual conversations we'd have at the water cooler and at the coffee station and grabbing a bite in the company or firm cafeteria or getting drinks after work. And those transitions in the day were just these natural boundaries that people took for granted and when we started working from home, all of a sudden we had to self-impose those boundaries and I think a lot of people didn't have the discipline to do that or didn't really even know how to start doing that and it's been something that's really been a struggle for a lot of workers.

[TRACEY DIAMOND]

Now, how do you find work/life balance in the post-pandemic or pandemic world?

[DEBBIE EPSTEIN HENRY]

I think that if part of your work is going to involve working from home, or some sort of hybrid work, you do really have to routinize your daily life. And that means, starting your day at the desk at whatever time makes sense to you. If you exercise, working that in at some point in the day. Build that time in, schedule it just as you would that client call or that colleague meeting. And if you don't really anchor your calendar with those different routinized things that are your priorities, you're going to just get consumed in the hours behind your desk. And so, it really does take that discipline. I think also a lot of us really need to reflect on a periodic basis about what are our priorities. I think a lot of us in the pandemic have reflected and really had more clarity on what's important, what isn't. And to really shed yourself of those

responsibilities that are not meaningful to you or those organizations that you are participating in in a fairly moderate way that aren't really contributing to organization or contributing or enriching your life and really shed those relationships, frankly, as well as those commitments that don't serve you or where you're really able to have somebody else step in and maybe contribute more value.

[TRACEY DIAMOND]

I do think that that takes some discipline, but it definitely is better way to get towards that path of happiness. I want to turn to another aspect of the show *Severance*. The show portrays work as really soulless. The innies entire lives are spent sitting in a cubicle, sorting random numbers on a computer screen into boxes. The data that they're supposed to be "refining" has been encrypted to the point that they really have no idea what they're looking at or how it fits in to the bigger picture of the company's mission. The data refining group that our main character works at also is completely isolated from the other departments. Which I think there is some sort of analogies there to the isolation that many experience working at home. In real life, first of all, how can companies get their employees to buy into the bigger mission and even be aware of what the bigger mission is? And from a remote work perspective, how do you foster that sense of unity and culture when you have employees scattered all over the place?

[DEBBIE EPSTEIN HENRY]

Really important question. So what I've really observed is that employees are looking for more of an alignment between their organizations and social purpose. It's no longer acceptable for employers to be silent with the various injustices that are going on around the world and so getting colleagues engaged in volunteer work or *pro bono* initiatives of your organizations is key to getting employees more engaged in the bigger mission. And it's a way to build bonds, but it's also a way to create more accountability within the organization and again to link-up more effectively what the organization is trying to do more from a social purpose perspective and get the employees to really build out that brand of the organization and be ambassadors of that brand. And I think that's really important. And with respect to your second question, I think getting colleagues more involved in other efforts of the organization, outside of their day job responsibilities. Really reinforce the workplace as a community which is what employees want. And there's so much about the great resignation that's been discussed and written about as of late. And I think that part of what is missing is you mention culture. That employees want to feel like they are part of a community and it's interesting, Evan mentioned before, the topic of empathy. I'll do a big shout out to Troutman Pepper. I collaborated with Troutman earlier, excuse me in late 2021, and one of my podcasts episodes with Troutman as a sponsor happened to be released today and I interviewed an expert on empathy, Sherry Turkle, who's a prominent MIT professor who wrote a memoir called *The Empathy Diaries*. And the topic of my interview of her was around cultivating empathy. And the notion that a firm like Troutman Pepper would take on hosting an event like that and facilitate a dialogue in the community of your colleagues, but also your clients around empathy. That is just what I'm talking about is reinforcing how a community, in this case Troutman Pepper, can be a resource for colleagues and clients, around something meaningful like empathy in the workplace and beyond. And that takes a level of courage to introduce those kinds of topics that historically would have been, I don't know, too fluffy or too,

you know, too intimate, for the workplace and now there's really an opportunity and a platform to explore those kinds of topics more.

[EVAN GIBBS]

I think it's even more, even getting even more specific for litigators. You know, things like empathy, sort of soft skills and things like that I think have historically been discouraged because there's this concept of well, you know, you've got to be this sort of aggressive, you know, take no prisoners type of person. I think that, you know, it's fine to be an aggressive litigator but I think, to your point, it's really important that people sort of realize that, you know, we're humans as well and that empathy is an important part of our overall existence. I think for me, it's easy, especially as a younger attorney, it was easy to sort of lose sight of that. And sort of feel like you have to have this persona of take no prisoners and be aggressive at all costs.

[TRACEY DIAMOND]

When I was a young associate in New York City, I worked for a law firm and one of my mentors was an older woman who spoke in a very soft-spoken manner all the time. And she was a top-notch litigator. And that was a real eye-opener for me because it showed me that you didn't need to raise your voice and be a bully in order to get your point across. That you could do it in a very soft-spoken way that still back that up with steel underneath and stand strong on your position and be a good advocate for your client without necessarily being a bully. But I think too often people associate loud with strong and soft with weak, you know.

[DEBBIE EPSTEIN HENRY]

I know exactly who you're talking about Tracey, of course, because we shared that colleague. And I think your point is an important one and it comes back to the comment we had and the conversation we had earlier around personal leadership. That she brought in her personal style there. And it worked because that is who she is and had she tried to be that bully in an aggressive traditional way it wouldn't have been as effective. And so, encouraging lawyers or other professionals to have the confidence to bring in their personal style is something that I think is long overdue.

[TRACEY DIAMOND]

So Debbie I want to turn to a different topic having to do with the show. In the show, workers are rewarded with really meaningless tokens. Finger traps, dance parties, waffle parties, bizarre waffle parties. The finger traps in particular are rife with symbolism right. The reward is literally a trap. How can companies reward performance in a way that is more meaningful?

[DEBBIE EPSTEIN HENRY]

I think tying the reward to the personal interests of the employee can be a really powerful way to recognize a contribution from an employee. So, for example, if a colleague is engaged in the arts and does a fabulous job on a pitch with a client, sending that colleague theater or ballet tickets really is a personal touch. Or if an employee has young kids and does some fabulous thing, sending tickets for a family outing and giving them that afternoon at that

baseball game or whatever it may be, is a really important gesture to show a thoughtfulness in that personalization that can be meaningful to somebody or if it's a junior person who really wants mentorship and really wants access to a leader, having that leader take the time to have lunch and sit down with that person and really hear how he or she can support them. Those kinds of demonstrations of a real awareness of what that person really cares about and then honoring and honoring them by recognizing them in a way that actually is meaningful. I'm paraphrasing, but the famous Maya Angelou quote that people will forget what you say and people will forget what you do but people won't forget how you make them feel. And so much of people feeling recognized and valued is when you demonstrate that you listen to them. And I remember when I was practicing law having a client who sort of had everything and, you know, personally just like didn't need anything. But there was a point where I really wanted to recognize this client and I remember when I had told him initially, oh I moved from New York to Philly and he said off-the-cuff you know, I just love those Philadelphia cheesesteaks. And I sent him these Philadelphia cheesesteaks, you know you can get them packaged in ice and they arrived in LA and he was just like, that's the best gift I've ever gotten. And I'm convinced, I mean I think the cheesesteaks actually were very good apparently, but I think the bigger issue was I like I heard him and I remembered it and I just filed it away. And again, it was personal. It wasn't about the deal that was went well and all that sort of stuff. It was about the personal touch and I think that's what employees want. They want the personal touch.

[TRACEY DIAMOND]

They want it to be thoughtful, they don't want it to be just be through money, although money is good. You don't want really just be have money thrown at them.

[DEBBIE EPSTEIN HENRY]

Right.

[TRACEY DIAMOND]

People say that your friends are the family that you choose, right. And like most employees, the four employees of the microdata refinement department in the show *Severance* did not get to choose each other. Unlike real life, however, those innies do not get to balance their work relationships with their friends and family on the outside since they have no memory of their friends and family on the outside. Their co-workers are the only friends they have. And those personalities are, you know, incredibly different. In the real world, how can employers help to foster friendships in the workplace, and is it in their best interest to do so?

[DEBBIE EPSTEIN HENRY]

I very much believe it's in an employer's interest because to me relationships are what build culture and they're also what differentiate workplaces. Because it's, again I referenced before, communities. I think it's so much about the communities that you can build, the loyalty that you can engender as an employer. So I think the answer for employers is investing in employees as people and not just in their job functions, what they were hired to do. So examples of that are investing in things like sponsorship. And when I say sponsorship I mean that ramped up version of mentoring and sponsorship being a term art around highly

regarded leaders at organizations investing in junior high potential talent. But investing in communication skills of your employees and leadership skills and networking and time-management because all of these opportunities to enhance your employees skills as people is going to make the workplace more hospitable. And it's gonna make employees want to work with their colleagues more readily and be engaged with those team members and make their colleagues look good. And all of that is about creating more positive work environment and in turn creating more incentives to deliver good work and deliver good results for clients. So, to me, it's all about the relationships and you see that, by the way, with people with successful careers. They end up following the people who sponsored them, who developed them, who invested in them. Again, not just as lawyers or as accountants, or as financial service executives, but as people. And they care about them as people outside of work as well.

[EVAN GIBBS]

I think you're absolutely right. You know, having those relationships is something that makes work more meaningful for the job you have and the job you may have in the future. But, you know, as employment lawyers, we can't help but cringe just a little when thinking about the cases that we're defend later on, but that's a very good point.

[TRACEY DIAMOND]

I think it's always tricky when you have a subordinate and a supervisor striking up a friendship. Of course, it adds another whole layer if it's a romantic relationship. But it's also equally important that employees have friends at work and people that they feel comfortable spending their days with or they're not going to buy into being at work in the first place. So I think there's going to be that inherent tension there. Anyway, we're running out of time, so I just wanted to give a moment to thank Debbie Epstein Henry again for joining us. You can hear about her podcast *Inspiration Loves Company* and find out more about her on www.debbieepsteinhenry.com. Debbie, thank you so much. And Evan, thanks again as always.

[DEBBIE EPSTEIN HENRY]

Thank you so much.

[TRACEY DIAMOND]

It was lovely having you.

[DEBBIE EPSTEIN HENRY]

I really enjoyed this conversation. Thanks so much to both of you.

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