Ep #47: Understanding External Validation

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With Your Host

Kori Linn

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This week we're talking about external validation.

You are listening to Love Your Job Before You Leave It, the podcast for ambitious, high-achieving women who are ready to stop feeling stressed about work and kiss burnout goodbye forever. Whether you're starting a business or staying in your day job, this show will give you the coaching and guidance you need to start loving your work today. Here's your host, Career Coach, Kori Linn.

Hey y'all, happy Wednesday. I hope you're having a fabulous day. I am already having a pretty great day. And I actually just had an amazing weekend. I went up to Seattle and stayed in like an Airbnb with a few friends celebrating a friend's birthday.

We actually had these plans on the books back when we lived in Seattle and didn't realize how fast we'd be moving to Sacramento. And then once we moved, our friends were like, 'Oh, are you still going to come?" And we decided to because we really wanted to maintain and invest in our Seattle friendships.

These particular friends are super near and dear to my heart. And I'm so glad we were able to make the trip. And it was a pretty small group. So just three couples, the six of us, and we did all get Covid tested, and we're all vaccinated. And we're all negative in the testing, just to be super safe.

And so once we were all together, since we'd done all that preparation, it was great just to like get to be with people in kind of like the old way. Where you just hang out in a house together and have amazing food and look at amazing views.

The Seattle area in the summer is really glorious and pretty. We were on a little island south of Seattle and it was really pretty. I actually took some great nature walks while I was there. Which I really loved because I just love the nature in that area. And the nature down here in Sacramento is a little bit different. It's also beautiful here, and I really like it. But it was nice to just get to have those walks in that area with the trees and plants that are native up there.

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Anyways, one of the things we did, and this is related to coaching, I promise. I know it seems like I'm on a bit of a tangent. But one of the things that we did was one of the people had brought a home karaoke setup. And he actually turned out to be an incredible singer.

It was just such a delight to watch and listen to him sing. And in addition to being a great singer he had great performative vibes. So he would like dance. It was super fun. I haven't done karaoke in ages because it's not exactly a pandemic friendly activity. But I really do like karaoke.

I don't identify as someone who's great at singing, although I do really like to sing, and I sing often. Something I have talked about before is how when I worked in the corporate IT world, I would often sing. I'd be like, "Okay, here's your deliverables." And I was kind of well-known around the office for being like fun and silly and singing.

So I did karaoke some songs. And I had so much fun, and it was such a perfect example of something I talk about all the time, which is being willing to suck. So I have a few karaoke staples that I'm like, "Okay, these are my songs I know I can do pretty well." I started with one of those. But there were some songs I really wanted to try that I knew this could be great or this could be fucking terrible.

And I decided to try some of the ones I'd never tried before. And I do think it felt a little safer than being in public. I mean, literally, physically safer because of Covid. But also socially and emotionally safer to be like, "Hey, friends of mine, I'm going to try this song I've never tried. If I hate singing it, we'll just turn it off, we'll do a different song."

But because I had that safety, I felt even more willing than normal to try something that might suck. And it was interesting because it didn't suck. I did okay at the songs that I thought might be fun to sing. But I also don't necessarily want to sing them again.

So now I've tried, and I was like, "All right, that wasn't terrible, but I'm not actually interested in investing and getting better at that or performing it again. I don't need to put it into my rotation of songs that I feel really

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comfortable with or do the effort it would take to get comfortable at them." Because some songs are really fast. And even if you know all the words, it can be really hard to sing them.

Anyways, the point is, the coaching point is when we want to be able to do anything we can't already do or haven't already done, being willing to suck is a great way to get there. The songs that I'm really good at now in karaoke or the songs that I feel really comfortable singing now in karaoke, whether or not I'm really good at them up for debate always, subjective assessment, I enjoy doing them and get compliments. I wasn't great when I first tried them, and I was willing to suck.

It was just like the songs that I tried this weekend. It was like me going, "Well, this could go well, or it could go badly. Am I willing to try it and see what happens?"

And that's everything in life. That's having a better experience at work. That's getting a new job. It's starting a business. It's asking out somebody you want to ask out. It's learning to knit. Anything you can't do now that you want to be able to do, our brains are going to be like, "What if we suck?" Because we might.

But even if we do, so fucking what? There's actually tons of shit I'm great at now that I used to suck at. And there is for you to. Because listen, we were all born as babies and none of us were born walking and talking. And some of us did have natural talent in that area, but many of us sucked. And then we just kept going until we got better. And we got so much better now it doesn't even strike us as something even remotely challenging to do.

Okay, there's also another element of the karaoke that I want to talk about. And it's related to today's topic, which is external validation. So when I was trying the songs I'd never tried before, and even when I was doing songs I had done before, I was paying close attention to what everyone else was doing and how they were responding.

And humans do this all the time because we are social animals. We look to other people and how they're responding to decide how safe we are, how

good we are, all these kinds of things. That's natural and it's normal, but when we understand that through the lens of coaching, we can also have access to that in a different way.

Here's what I mean by that. It's naturally built into us to look to other humans to see how they're perceiving us to decide if we're safe or not. And part of that has to do with how humans evolved. Again, we're social animals, we used to need to depend on each other for safety in a way that we don't necessarily today.

I mean, I'm a big fan of relationships. And I do think social engagement is great and can be really wonderful for people. But we don't need other people to survive in exactly the same way as humans used to further back when we were evolving. We don't live in small tribes anymore where if someone gets mad at us, we might get kicked out of the tribe.

I mean, we might still have a social group where if someone gets mad at us, we might get kicked out of that friend group. But we aren't relying on the friend group for safety, for shelter, for food and those things. But I think emotionally it can still feel like we are. And so we look to other people and our relationships with other people to see how we're doing, to see if we're safe, to see if we're okay, to see if we're doing well enough.

If what we're perceiving from other people, indicates that we're safe and doing well, we might feel fine about all of that. But sometimes, what we perceive from others, whether because it's true or because it's our confirmation bias or some other perception error, indicates to us that we're not safe.

And sometimes we're like, literally physically not safe. A lot of times we are physically safe but our brain, for some reason, is assessing some other kind of threat. And it might be because there's actual conflict with another person. Or it might be because this situation that we're in reminds our brain of another situation that felt dangerous. And it's a little bit like this associative connection that can happen.

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It's kind of like we talked about in the episode on the pleasure gloss, there's also the displeasure gloss. That can happen too, where it's like our brain has associated something with a threat. And then when that thing comes back, even if there's not a threat our brain might perceive a threat.

Okay, all of that's just laying some groundwork here. Here's what I want to talk about, though. When we have external validation, what we're really having is internal validation that we're giving someone else credit for.

Here's what I mean by that. If someone says to you, "Great job, you did a really great job." And you don't believe them, their validation doesn't do anything for you. The words coming out of their face hole don't impact you at all if you don't buy into them. But if someone says, "Great job, you did a great job." And you are like, "Oh, they think I did a great job. I did a great job," then you do feel better.

So I think this is really important because I think a lot of us think that we want external validation, or we don't think we should need it, but we think we do need it. And I just think it's like a little bit more complex and a little bit more simple than that.

And the way it's more complex is the part I talked about earlier. Like, yes, we are social animals. And the way it's more simple is, the only reason we want that external validation is so that we can have the thoughts we want to have. And we can have those without the external validation. And in fact, if we don't have the thoughts, the external validation won't do anything for us.

You have all experienced this where someone gave you a compliment, or praised you, or sang your praises, I guess basically I just said praise twice, whatever, and it didn't do anything for you. Because in your own head you were thinking, they don't mean it. They're just being nice. If they really knew me, they wouldn't like me. They haven't seen this other thing I did that was terrible, et cetera, et cetera.

Whereas when someone gives us praise, or we get a positive review at work, or we win an award or whatever, if in our heads, we think, "This is great. I'm good enough, they like me," then we feel great.

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So basically, what I want you to take away from this is two things. Thing one, is if you're always looking to other people to decide how to feel and to decide if you're okay, that's normal. That's a built in part of being human as a social animal.

And it's also optional. You can realize that your brain is doing that and go, "Oh, it's looking to everyone else to decide if I'm safe. But I can decide if I'm safe on purpose rather than let my brains programming, do this perception thing to decide if I'm safe." And you can also take into account like, "Oh, my brain thinks this situation is unsafe, because it reminds me of this other thing that happened before that actually was unsafe."

Or "My brain thinks this situation is unsafe because it thinks my boss doesn't like me. But what are the actual facts about my relationship with my boss? Did my boss actually say the words I don't like you? Or is my brain having some kind of like confirmation bias? Or is this maybe like one of my thought patterns where I always assume that people and authority figures dislike me?"

This will help us sort out, first of all, why you're looking to other people, and what the actual facts of the situation are, and what you want to choose to think about those facts on purpose. And I think it's really important to normalize this and understand that it's part of being a human.

Because what I see is people come to me and going, "I know I shouldn't want external validation, but I really like it." And I'm like, "Yeah, of course, you really like it. You're a social animal, your brain wants it, but it only wants it for X, Y, Z reasons." And once you understand that, then you can kind of work around that if you want to. You don't have to, it's just an option.

Okay, so that's thing one. Thing two, is whatever you want to be able to believe that you only give yourself permission to believe when you get external validation, you can just give yourself permission to believe that whether you get external validation or not.

So, for instance, if you get an amazing review at work, an amazing performance review. And then you get to think all this awesome shit about

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yourself, you can just give yourself permission to think all that awesome shit about yourself whether you get an amazing performance review or not.

Here's the interesting thing about that. One, it will feel harder at first because you're not used to it. The way most of our brains are, we're used to kind of like bolstering with other people's opinions. That's why external validation feels a lot easier for people, that in addition to our brains being wired to want it and think it means we're safe.

It's also going to feel a little alien at first, you're going to be like, "Who do I think I am to get to think all these awesome thoughts about myself?" But once you get through that part and you practice the awesome thoughts you want to think and you work on them, even without that external validation. Here's the beautiful thing, they'll also very likely improve your work performance.

So let's say, you get a medium performance review. It's pretty good, but not perfect. But you choose to think all the thoughts you would think if you had a perfect one. Thoughts like, "I'm awesome at this. I'm getting better all the time. They love me and appreciate my work."

Let's say you do the work to think those things, those thoughts are going to feel good and they're going to fuel more productivity. They're going to fuel more effectiveness. They're going to fuel more growth. And they're going to fuel more delight in your work, and they're going to feel awesome.

Whereas if you get that medium performance review and then you're like, "I suck. I'm terrible. I'll never get better." Those thoughts all feel bad and tend to lead, I think, to worse performance in the future. And so in this way thoughts prove themselves true.

If you think you're really good at your work, you'll get really good at your work. You'll notice all the ways you're already good at it and the ways you're not, you'll be like, "Oh, well, I'll just improve that because I'm really good at my work. So obviously, I can improve that. Obviously, if I do enough practice, I'm going to get better at it".

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 Whereas when we focus on what's not working or we focus on the negative story, then we tend to create more of that because it saps our energy. And it makes us not want to bother and not want to do anything, because we think like, "Oh, I'm just going to get a bad review anyways."

And an interesting thing in there is a medium review isn't a bad review. But to a lot of people I know anything less than a perfect review would be a "bad" review. So that's just something interesting to note.

It's not like I'm saying, if you get a terrible performance review to just think, "Well, I'm the best, and they're dumb." I think it's more about validating yourself, and your potential, and your ability to learn. And praising yourself as much as you can. Find all the things you can to praise, praise those first.

And then, yes, if we're not doing our job adequately, we also want to address that. But I think addressing it through the lens that we're awesome and we can figure it out is much more effective than kind of just crumbling under, like, "Oh, I got this bad review, and it defines me now."

Okay, so let's review. We all want external validation because we're social animals. But there actually really is no external validation because the only way we feel other people's validation is if we upload what they're saying to our brain and choose to agree with it. If someone gives you external validation and you decide it doesn't count, it doesn't count. Because you decided it didn't. If you feel really good after some external validation, it's because you gave yourself matching internal validation, you're just giving them credit for it.

So the next time that you find yourself really wanting some external validation, I want you to do two things. Thing one is I want you to normalize that for yourself. Of course you want that. You're a human with a human brain, totally normal to want that.

And guess what, it's an inside job. You can give it to yourself. That might feel harder at first, it might feel a little unnatural weird at first. But that's just because you're not in that habit. And what I really mean by that is you're not aware of where the validation is actually coming from right now. Which

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is from your own brain anyways, we're just taking a shortcut where we're not collecting other people's thoughts to give ourselves permission to think them.

All right y'all, that's what I have for you today. Shoot me any questions you have about this, or any other topics and I'll talk to you next week.

Thank you for listening to Love Your Job Before You Leave It. We'll have another episode for you next week. And in the meantime, if you're feeling super fired up, head on over to korilinn.com for more guidance and resources.