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***HIRING TO FIRING PODCAST — MANAGING PERFECTIONISM: THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA***  
***HOSTS: TRACEY DIAMOND AND EVAN GIBBS***  
***GUEST: ELISE HOLTZMAN***

**Tracey Diamond:**

Welcome to *Hiring to Firing* the podcast. I'm Tracey Diamond, labor and employment attorney at Troutman Pepper, and I'm here with my co-host, Evan Gibbs. Together we tackle all employment and HR issues from hiring to firing. Today we welcome our guest, Elise Holtzman, founder of The Lawyer's Edge. Elise helps lawyers and law firms bring in more revenue by improving communication, leadership, and business development skills in attorneys and leadership teams. Elise, why don't you tell us a bit about your work history, why you founded The Lawyer's Edge, and what your organization does?

**Elise Holtzman:**

Thanks so much, Tracy, and thanks to you and to Evan and to Troutman Pepper for having me on the show today. I am a former practicing lawyer. I graduated from law school a very long time ago and started my career doing commercial real estate transactions at two big law firms in New York City. I absolutely loved it. It was a lot of fun doing deals back in the days where we actually were in rooms with tons and tons of documents and having everybody get together and sign them. When I was a seventh year associate, I had my first child. Back then, part-time was really very new. People didn't quite know what to do with it.

I was offered a part-time position to work 40 hours a week for 80% of my salary. I did that for a while, but as you can imagine, as the most senior associate in the practice group running hundreds of millions of dollars of deals, it became untenable, particularly because I am also married to another big law lawyer. I wound up feeling there are no coaches. There are no female mentors. I don't have any lawyers on my family. I guess this thing just doesn't work. After a couple of years of doing that, I wound up opting out of the law. Fast forward, I decided that I wanted to go back to doing something, wasn't totally sure what that was going to be, and I discovered executive and leadership coaching.

After a full year certificate program in which I got trained as a coach, I started The Lawyer's Edge. At the beginning I wasn't really sure who I was coaching. I wasn't sure who I wanted to work with, and I realized that the legal profession could use some help in certain areas, through no fault of their own. There are many things that lawyers struggle with that are related to business, that are related to leader development and career advancement. I decided to focus my efforts on lawyers, and we've been doing that ever since.

**Tracey Diamond:**

It's been really interesting watching your career progression, and I can relate to that 80% working 40 hours a week crazy version of what we call part-time, which is not reality for many other careers, but seems to be in our field. Elise, we're going to talk today about perfectionism, and I know you've spoken about this topic before. Can you tell us what you mean by that term and where it comes from?

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**Elise Holtzman:**

I do talk on this topic a lot. There's a program that I put together because I saw a need for it called Imperfect Impactful Leadership. I do it primarily for women's groups and also primarily for lawyers, although I've been requested to do things for other professions as well. The reason I put it into place is because I noticed that perfectionism is something that gets us rewards early on, and then can become a challenge for us. It can be something that becomes an obstacle. Many lawyers will say that they're perfectionist, and many people in other industries will say that they're perfectionists. In the legal profession, there are two things going on.

One is that lawyers are taught to be perfectionists, right? We've got to dot every I and cross every T and make sure every case is exactly right and no typos in any documents and all of that sort of thing. The issue is that the people who are in law school, many of them are already perfectionists, and this particularly affects women and people of color. There's a woman by the name of Reshma Saujani, who wrote a book called *Brave, Not Perfect*. She's also done a TED Talk on the topic, and you may know her because she's the person who started an organization called Girls Who Code.

She's not in the legal profession, but she noticed that many girls were not stepping up into computer science type activities. She was trying to figure out why. She noticed that when she put together a program that was just for girls and there weren't boys in the room, tons of girls were coming out of the woodwork. She started looking into it and determined that there's an issue of perfectionism, that girls are still, even in today's world, socialized differently than boys.

Girls are socialized typically to get good grades and be polite and be helpful to everyone, and don't be too loud and don't talk back and be clean and well put together and your nails have to be clean and not dirty and all of that sort of thing. She says, in short, girls are socialized to be perfect, whereas boys are typically socialized more along the lines of jump off the top of the monkey bars, get dirty, have dirt under your nails, talk back a little bit because it shows that you're confident about yourself, and even sometimes break the rules. Because after all, boys will be boys.

The idea is that particularly women are socialized for perfectionism, which actually brings us rewards in the beginning where the teachers love you, you get into a great college, get into a great law school, get into a great graduate school, get a great job, whatever it may be. But that as you start to become more senior, your job, the job of leader, requires a bunch of skills that perfectionists haven't been practicing. Things like outside of the box thinking, being willing rather to take risks, being willing to say, "Hey, we tried this thing and it didn't work. We're going to shift gears and do something else."

That's what I talk about particularly with women is to have them understand that there is a double-edged sword of perfectionism. And that in order to move into senior positions and into leadership positions, it's important to try to back off some of those perfectionistic tendencies that we've learned over the years and shift into a more big picture, not so risk averse way of doing things.

**Tracey Diamond:**

There's a lot to talk about there. I often see the tension in client work where we're charging by the hour between wanting to give the absolute most perfect work product where that may cost way too much money and the client will be very upset about that because a good enough work

product is really what they were looking for. But before we go further, I want to bring in the movie because we always use a popular TV show or movie to kick off our discussion about a workplace issue, and today we're going to discuss the iconic movie, *The Devil Wears Prada*, and it teaches us about perfectionism.

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Anne Hathaway plays Andy Sachs, a young journalist who lands the job as a junior personal assistant to Miranda Priestly, editor-in-chief of Runway Fashion Magazine, a job that "millions of girls would kill for." Miranda's played by Meryl Streep. Andy is not particularly fashion savvy at first and is dressed down by Miranda for rolling her eyes at a fashion choice as being all about "stuff." Let's take a listen.

**Miranda Priestly:**

Something funny?

**Andy Sachs:**

No. No. No. Nothing. It's just both of those belts look exactly the same to me. I'm still learning about this stuff and...

**Miranda Priestly:**

This stuff? Oh, okay, I see. You think this has nothing to do with you? You go to your closet and you select, I don't know, that lumpy blue sweater, for instance, because you're trying to tell the world that you take yourself too seriously to care about what you put on your back. But what you don't know is that that sweater is not just blue, it's not turquoise, it's not lapis, it's actually cerulean. You're also blithely unaware of the fact that in 2002, Oscar de la Renta did a collection of cerulean gowns. And then I think it was Yves Saint Laurent, wasn't it, who showed cerulean military jackets? I think we need a jacket here.

And then cerulean quickly showed up in the collections of eight different designers. I'm going to filter down through the department stores, and then trickle on down into some tragic casual corner where you not doubt fished it out of some clearance bin. However, that blue represents millions of dollars and countless jobs. And it's sort of comical how you think that you've made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry, when, in fact, you're wearing a sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room from a pile of stuff.

**Tracey Diamond:**

There are a few lessons here. First, Miranda completely humiliates Andy without ever raising her voice. What does Miranda's attitude towards Andy tell us about management style?

**Evan Gibbs:**

In my time into law, there have been different management styles. You have some who have a tendency to talk down to you and make you feel humiliated, especially when you're like Andy was at the movie and you're an entry level professional, even if you're eager beaver. Unlike Andy in the show and you're really excited about the job and enthusiastic, you're going to make

mistakes as a junior attorney. Whether it's a senior associate or a partner, sometimes the critiques of your early work product aren't necessarily feel...

They're very extremely, and it can make you feel really humiliated. But then there are others who really will take you under their wing and take a very different approach, sort of positive way, more carrot than stick.

**Tracey Diamond:**

I also think that, to Evan's point, there are so many different management styles. I think there are a lot of things that play into it. One is, how did someone manage you when you were coming up? Is it something that you just do because somebody else did it to you, or is it something where you said, "That didn't work for me and I'm not going to do that to somebody else?" I think sometimes in the legal field, we tend to be... It's almost like a hazing ritual, right? We were treated awful, so we need to treat everybody else awful as you're going up and more senior in the ranks. It's terrible.

**Elise Holtzman:**

I think that's right. There's a lot of that. Another thing that I think comes into play is generational differences. There are four generational differences in the workplace, and I think every generation looks at the generation behind them and in front of them and thinks these people are crazy and they don't have it right and they don't know what they're doing. They're either breaking the mold or sticks in the mud or whatever it may be.

But I think generational differences play a role. And then I think the third thing that comes to mind for me is personality. At The Lawyer's Edge, we use a set of personality tools that are designed to be a communication system, and it's all about how you use personality to practically drive business results. One of the things that we do know from the legal profession in particular is that, as I said earlier, a lot of people in the legal profession show up similarly. They have a similar way of looking at things. One of the bad things about perfectionism is that it creates some micromanaging.

When you are somebody who is a senior person and you are pursuing perfection rather than pursuing excellence, you may be in a situation where you say things along the lines of, "If I really want it done, I'll do it myself." As a perfectionist yourself, you become a micromanager. I don't think Miranda was a micromanager in the sense that she wanted everything done a certain way. She wasn't on top of them every second. She had learned how to... You said that she dressed Andy down without even really saying very much.

She had one of those scathing looks that she was able to give Andy and Emily that she had perfected, but they knew that every detail mattered. In that respect, I think she was a micromanager, and that drives perfectionism in other people as well, because most people want to please their bosses.

**Tracey Diamond:**

Watching Meryl Streep in action, her acting in this movie was just so incredibly impressive. Because just seeing her, you could feel it, right? Viscerally, you could feel the anxiety that she's producing in these subordinate young women coming up through the ranks without ever really

yelling. It's just so interesting to me. Miranda's staff obviously seems to be in a constant state of terror. Let's listen to another clip, which is a good example of this.

**Miranda Priestly:**

Is there is some reason that my coffee isn't here. Has she died or something?

**Emily:**

No. God! No. Bloody done. I hope you know that this is a very difficult job for which you are totally wrong. And if you mess up, my head is on a chopping block. Now, hang that up. Don't just fling it anywhere.

**Tracey Diamond:**

What are the legal risks with this sort of management style? Evan, do you want to start with that?

**Evan Gibbs:**

I think this is one of the things we've talked about with clients. Many times in the past, the management style from the top down really impacts morale. And then morale, in my opinion, drives a lot of litigation risk because people that aren't happy aren't going to perform well, and then the people who don't perform well get either managed out or they quit and they're upset and more likely to file litigation. In my experience, we never see the happy employees who leave for greener pastures or whatever.

They're not the ones that sue. It's always the companies who have this sort of culture that's maybe a hostile or micromanaging culture. That's where I see 90% of employment lawsuits coming from and that kind of culture. I think it increases the company's risk profile to have that sort of leading through fear as opposed to something else.

**Tracey Diamond:**

Look, even if an employee doesn't have a claim, it doesn't stop them necessarily from suing, right? I don't know that Anne Hathaway's character, Andy, has a claim here. I don't really see any protected category that harassment claim will be based on. Elise, what could Miranda do differently here to get to the excellence she's striving for without making her team freaked out and crazy?

**Elise Holtzman:**

I love that question. I'm going to answer that, but I just want to go back to something that you and Evan were talking about. The litigation risk, of course, is there, as Evan points out. Tracey, it's funny because as all of us know, we'll get friends and relatives calling us about things and saying, "If this happened to me, can I get sued for that?" And the answer is, you can get sued for anything. I'm not saying that they're going to win a claim, but it's difficult and it's upsetting and it's challenging.

**Tracey Diamond:**

It's expensive.

**Elise Holtzman:**

It's expensive, exactly. The other thing is really about culture, because one of the things we're talking about these days is talent retention. Evan touched on this too, that when you have a difficult culture, you're going to lose people, not just because maybe they're not good, maybe those are the people that you want to lose, but you're going to lose people because they don't feel like they're part of a team. That's what, in many ways, the younger generations are looking for. We've raised them to be part of the conversation. Baby boomers were not necessarily invited by their parents to be part of the conversation. The younger millennials and Gen Zs were invited to be part of the conversation.

Then they get to work and it's an entirely top-down environment, which completely baffles them and baffles the people to whom they're reporting. One of the things that I think that Miranda could have done was to have more of a conversation with Andy. I mentioned Emily too, because Emily... Those of you who watched the movie will remember, Emily was there before Andy, and the poor thing was constantly... She was a miserable person and wasn't very nice to Andy, but that was largely because she was under so much pressure. I think that...

**Tracey Diamond:**

And because her role model was Miranda teaching her this bad behavior.

**Elise Holtzman:**

That's exactly right. It's such a great point. If Miranda had been able to create a team environment where instead of hitting these assistants against each other, she had created this environment, whereas, "Listen, we are all in. We are all in here for the magazine. We're all in here for one another. We're going to lift each other up.

And yeah, challenges are going to come up, but we're going to be able to work through them," where she made it clear to them that they were pursuing excellence, and while the industry requires perfectionism, that she was not expecting them to be perfect, but to give the magazine their all, I think that they would've been a lot less frazzled, a lot less stressed out, and probably would've given her a better work product earlier on.

**Tracey Diamond:**

Miranda does try to explain the why to Andy in that first clip, but she does it in such a way that is so humiliating, that while Andy does get the message, eventually she changes her fashion choices and does buy into the process a lot better, was done because she's afraid, not because she necessarily wants to or understands it or believes in it.

**Elise Holtzman:**

Exactly. She turned herself into somebody that she didn't necessarily even recognize or totally respect to meet Miranda's requirements. I think that goes back to this idea of rather than having a monologue and basically saying to people, "This is the way it is," and dressing them

down and making them feel small is engaging in conversation with them to explain the why and the background and saying to them, "It's understandable you might feel that this is all fluffy, but here's why I see this as really powerful and not so fluffy. I think that if you buy into this, you're going to really enjoy it here." That's a very different conversation.

**Tracey Diamond:**

Sure. And definitely lessons for management all around. I've read an article about how *The Devil Wears Prada's* Miranda, maybe we should be looking at her differently. There's no doubt that under Miranda's demands, Andy changes, right? Her fashion choices become re glamorous. She becomes more confident and adept at anticipating Miranda's every demanding need. She seems to have a little bit more self-respect than she did at the beginning of the movie and ability to navigate such a demanding world. Is there something to be said about Miranda's insistence on perfectionism and is it worth the cost?

**Evan Gibbs:**

I would love to speak to this, because this is something I thought about a lot personally. I have worked for some extremely demanding lawyers in my career. I know you all have as well. I really do hate to say this, but I learned the most from those that I was terrified of, that scared the bejeezus out of me and that I was like, "Oh my God! When I give them a draft a motion, it better be filing ready. It better not have a single typo. It better be ready to be read by a federal appeals court." It's unfortunate because the stress of that, I'm looking back now, I've been practicing for 11 plus years in big law firms, the stress of that is unbelievable.

When I look back and I think about starting over as a new lawyer, I think, "My God, I would not put myself through that ringer again." I don't know if I could. But it is just so incredibly stressful to live your daily work life in terror that you're going to screw something up and then everything's got to be perfect. But where I'm at now, I look at the skillset that I've developed and I know that at least part of that came from working so hard because I was terrified. Looking back, if I worked with people who had a more positive reinforcement methodology, management style as opposed to I'm going to whip you in the shape, would I be where I am?

I don't know. I don't know the answer to that question. I have no idea. But I can say that it is a very stressful situation. I'd love to hear you all's thoughts on if you had mentors or managers that took a more carrot as opposed to a stick approach.

**Elise Holtzman:**

I think that there's a very fine line between excellence and perfection. I think that if we have managers that help us pursue excellence, that they will get as much out of us, I think, if they know what they're doing. And that involves feedback also, feedback so that you understand the why. If you take your feedback as a to-do list and really do something with it, then I think you can be successful. At my first firm, there were a few different people that I worked for. Two of them were more along the Miranda, more out of the Miranda category, and one of them, who was the chair of the department that I was in at the time, was much more warm and taught me tremendously and was much more warm and loving, if you want to put it that way, in the workplace than the other two were. One of the ones that was very difficult, I just learned to hate him. That was what I learned from the experience. The other one, I have a lot of respect

for him. He's very well-known and he's very successful, but he scared, as you say, he scared the bejeezus out of people. One of the reasons I think he actually liked me was because I was scared of him, but I wouldn't let him see it. And he knew.

I learned a lot from him, but I really remember more the person who was kinder to me, because I would go into his office, I felt comfortable asking my dumb questions. I felt that he was somebody who really wanted to mold me and teach me. Evan, you mentioned the stress. Wouldn't it be nice if we could learn and succeed without that level of stress and without carrying that level of stress around for the rest of our lives? I think we can have some compassion for Miranda as well, right? Because I think that she herself feels that she has to be a perfectionist in order to succeed in her industry.

She goes around not being authentic, and you see that because she sacrifices her marriage. She tries not to sacrifice her kids, but she's raising them in what I think to be a difficult way, which is they have to have a manuscript of the Harry Potter book before it even comes out so that she can prove to them how much she loves them and how much of a doting mother she is. I think that she probably thinks she has no choice. I think that she's in a difficult situation as well.

### **Tracey Diamond:**

We all answer to somebody, right? Either you're answering to your boss, who's answering to their boss, who's answering to the head of the company, who's answering to the board.

I think sometimes when you're lower down in that chain of command, you don't realize that. You think that your direct supervisor is all-knowing and all-consuming and that they could do whatever they want. And that's just never really the case. In the law firm analogy, associates are answering to partners or answering to their clients, and the clients can be equally and more demanding than the partner is to the associate. It all kind of filters up and then filters down again. I had a similar experience as both of you.

In one particular firm I worked at, I had two partners I worked with, one of whom was extremely demanding and had a reputation for that and really taught me how to be the writer that I am today. Her writing skills were topnotch. She would mark up my briefs, and I really learned a tremendous amount from her. The other one, much softer skills, never raised her voice. Her door was always open. And from her, I learned how to be a good lawyer. I really took from both of them, but it was certainly more comfortable dealing with the second one than dealing with the first one, but I highly respected the first one too.

I think as an employee and as an associate in the law firm world, it's important to figure out how to learn best from the people that you work with and just not to be afraid to speak up and stand up for yourself, but also take to heart the fact that at the end of the day, there's demands that are being made on you to make you a better person and a better lawyer too.

All right. This has been certainly a really interesting conversation and a fun way to talk about *The Devil Wears Prada*. I really thank everybody for listening in. Thank you so much, Elise, for joining us today. I encourage our listeners to listen to our other podcast episodes.

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