

KRISTIE KLEIN: BEEF

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.

Evan Gibbs:

Our guest today is Kristie Klein. She's associate general counsel at Southern Company here in Atlanta. Thanks so much for joining us, Kristie. We really appreciate you taking the time out of your day to be here with us. Why don't you tell us just a little bit about Southern Company and your role there.

Kristie Klein:

Sure. Hello everyone and Evan, Tracey, thank you for having me. Like you said, I'm associate general counsel at Southern Company, which is one of the largest utilities in the country. It provides clean, safe, reliable, and affordable energy to over 9 million customers. We have just over 27,000 employees at Southern Company. I am the practice group leader over the labor and employment and the compensation and benefits teams.

Evan Gibbs:

Fantastic.

Tracey Diamond:

So nice to meet you, Kristie. Our topic today is employee burnout. I don't know about you guys, but we're recording on a Friday morning and I am feeling the burnout from the week. As we always do, we're going to start with a clip, today from a popular TV show called Beef, which is a Netflix series that everyone lately has been talking about.

Beef follows the aftermath of a road rage incident between two strangers, Danny Cho, a failing contractor, and Amy Lao, a self-made entrepreneur. As the two go head-to-head, we learn about the frustrations in each of their lives, including feelings of being overwhelmed and burnt out. This fuels their anger to such an extent that a simple road incident could take a dark turn. In our first clip, Amy and her stay-at-home artist husband, George, have an argument about the impending sale of Amy's company. Let's take a listen.

George:

I thought you wanted me to be more assertive.

Amy:

Yeah, not now. There's millions of dollars on the line, you know? She hasn't even sent a term sheet yet.

George:

Babe, there are more important things in life than money.

Amy:

Spent two years putting this deal together. I mean, that the least you could do is help, you know?

George:

Excuse me?

Amy:

Yeah.

George:

I do help. I help all the time.

Amy:

It's like you have no awareness of how much I have on my plate right now. I bust my for this family.

George:

Hey, so do I. Those faces don't just make themselves.

Amy:

They also don't make money.

George:

You are obsessed with money. That's all you ever talk about anymore.

Amy:

George, I didn't grow up the way you did, okay? Do you ever notice how it's only people who have money that think money isn't important? You know the Buddhas only the Buddha because he was a prince first, right? He had stuff to renounce.

George:

If money is going to drive us apart, then I renounce.

Amy:

We can't renounce because all your dad left us was tables and chairs.

George:

This is a celebration of chairs.

Speaker 6:

Hi, mommy.

George:

I just wish you would unload the dishwasher sometimes.

Amy:

I barely have time to eat off of those dishes.

George:

Babe, it takes five minutes. Or we can do it together. Turn on some music, make it fun.

Amy:

Yeah, no, no, I know. I hear you. Let's just try to enjoy the rest of the evening, okay?

Speaker 8:

Please don't sit on the art, ma'am.

Amy:

Oh, okay.

Tracey Diamond:

Evan and Kristie, why should companies be concerned about employee burnout? Seems like an obvious question, right?

Evan Gibbs:

Yeah, I mean, I think to me the most obvious thing probably to our listeners as well is the impact on productivity and the impact on work product, quality, and just overall employee morale, I think. It impacts every aspect of someone's life if they're feeling that burnout, so I think there really are a lot of implications.

Kristie Klein:

I agree. I think along with the lack of attention to detail that can come with burnout, you also increase your safety risks. We have a lot of employees in safety-sensitive positions and when they're burned out, that lack of attention to detail, just the inability to focus properly, can create real liabilities for your company. It's an important thing to focus on.

Tracey Diamond:

I read an article recently about how the way we do work now, particularly office work with the constant interruptions of email and instant messaging and text messaging causes employee burnout to increase so much faster, which makes a lot of sense. That really resonated with me because I could feel it in my own practice where you're being constantly interrupted. It's hard to complete a thought at any given time.

Evan Gibbs:

Yeah, that's right. I sometimes think about when I started practicing, which seems like forever ago now, but when I started practicing, Westlaw was already ubiquitous. Everybody used Westlaw for their research and I wouldn't know how to go do research in a book and I wouldn't really know how to function without email. But sometimes I hear some of the older partners talk about how it used to be and everything went out in letters and did the research in the books and there were no text messages.

Kristie, you know Seth, and he was telling me he remembered when the Blackberries first came out and how crazy that was, and sometimes I long for those pre-Blackberry, pre-email days. I'd love to at least practice in that era for a little while. I think it would be kind of refreshing to not get interrupted every 10 minutes because I don't know about y'all, but for me, clients now, they have my personal cell phone number, so I get a lot of texts from clients. It's not just email these days. I mean it's, here's a text, answer now. It feels like it's even more urgent than an email sometimes.

Tracey Diamond:

I get that too, and honestly sometimes I think, "Well, maybe I should just turn it off," but I think if I turned everything off, I'd start to get really anxious because it's all turned off because it sort of feels like a third arm. It's like an appendage to your body.

Kristie Klein:

When I started at Troutman, I was one of the first groups to get that Blackberry. As a young associate, I remember initially feeling a freedom with it, like, "Oh, I don't have to sit in my office and worry about if an email came in." And so initially it felt freeing. It felt like, "Oh, I can go out, explore the city and if something urgent comes, I'll know because I have this Blackberry," but looking back, it really blurred the lines of the separation of work and life, and then the pandemic hit.

I was joking the other day with one of our HR folks who's dealing with a tough situation and they said that the employee was kind of on the edge of, she couldn't tell. She was calling me to figure out if it was a request for accommodation or not, and she said, yeah, the employee said that they were feeling some anxiety. And I joked, but I think it's authentic, is like "Who isn't?" I mean, in this day and age, we all have anxiety and the ability to feel that burnout in large part I think because of those blurred lines and just never being able to escape.

Tracey Diamond:

Yeah, I've gotten that question many times from clients of, is it a reasonable accommodation to eliminate stress at work? And it's impossible to eliminate all of workplace stress, but I think some employees are expecting that you should be able to do that. And just for the record, this is not legal advice, but it's not a reasonable accommodation to expect a stress-free environment at work.

Evan Gibbs:

Yeah, that's right. I think that would be an undue burden, I think, on the company. I think it's an impossible burden to meet.

Tracey Diamond:

We hope.

Evan Gibbs:

Yeah, that's right. We'll see what our friends at the 11th Circuit say about that, but I believe that-

Tracey Diamond:

Evan and I always argue about which Circuit's going to say what.

Evan Gibbs:

Yeah, that's right. Yeah, Tracey's up in the northeast and we're situated here firmly in the south, so there are some diverging court opinions on some of the things we talk about sometimes.

I'm curious, we're talking about how this impacts our personal lives and I think that folks who have young kids, well, they don't even have to be that young, but school-aged kids, how this can really impact folks. Maybe when they're trying to juggle all those responsibilities, those personal responsibilities and their household responsibilities. I'm curious, have either of you had that particular issue come up through your HR departments or clients or anything like that where the constant interruptions or things like that were impacting employees?

Kristie Klein:

I have a five-year-old. I don't remember how old Amy's daughter is in Beef, but I think she's-

Tracey Diamond:

Probably about the same age, I would think. Yeah.

Kristie Klein:

I think so. And so I definitely feel the anxiety of trying to be multiple places at the same time and balancing all of those things, the stress that adds to it. I think a lot of employees with young kids in the past few years with remote work, I think been some great benefits to that. But again, it's the blurred line.

I mean, I remember when the pandemic first hit and now I'm home. I'm a full-time lawyer and I have a two-year-old. My husband's a consultant, so he already had a home office. I did not have that, and I remember at some points taking calls in my closet just trying to kind of hide from the kid, but it didn't matter. I mean, she was stealth. She could find me anywhere. So I literally had to take all my calls out walking around the city of Atlanta just so that I wouldn't have the disruption of my child. So I can relate to the stresses that adds.

Tracey Diamond:

Do you think that it's changed now that we're sort of on the back end of the pandemic where there's still many hybrid work arrangements? I'm kind of wondering what you both think about that in terms of, do you think your customers, clients are less tolerant of a kid yelling at a background or a dog Zoom-bombing a conference call than they were maybe a year ago?

Evan Gibbs:

I think so. I mean, at least my personal experience, and I talk to clients. I've got one client, every time I talk to him on the phone, his cat comes walking across the screen. It's like every call, and that stuff I think, to me, has become much more acceptable. Like dress codes and things like that. I mean, I've seen clients and other attorneys, opposing counsel, taking calls from some questionable backgrounds and it's all just kind of acceptable. I think, at least in my experience, folks have become much more, I guess, tolerant or accepting of just taking people where they are and understanding that life is life and you got to deal with it on life's terms.

Tracey Diamond:

In a way it's kind of cool.

Evan Gibbs:

Yeah.

Tracey Diamond:

Because it means it's all about the work and less about all the other stuff, right? All the FaceTime stuff that people were worried about in years past. It's really about the bottom line with the work now.

Evan Gibbs:

Yeah, in a lot of ways.

Kristie Klein:

I agree. I think it's kind of maybe the evolution of that change. Initially we talked about the Blackberry and the blurred lines, but during the pandemic we had no choice. Kids were running into photos, to video screens, to your Zoom call. Half of us were wearing blazers on top, pajamas on the bottom, and so I think we got to a point where we could no longer pretend that we had these separate universes and that.

Now I think we all acknowledge that we are all working with multiple things going on at the same time, and I don't envision that we'll ever go back, but every once in a while while I'm back in the office and everyone's there, it almost feels strange like, "Oh, we're all here again in the same room and there aren't kids running around or dogs barking."

Tracey Diamond:

Yet, I think that the curious piece of this is that employees are feeling more burnt out than ever despite more flexibility in work arrangements. Why do you think that is and what can a company do? What resources can a company provide to employees to help?

Evan Gibbs:

I don't know. It's such a weird thing, right? I mean, it does seem like the burnout and anxiety is at a new peak and I don't know if it's that companies are just generally operating leaner and people have taken on more responsibilities or if it's the fact that there is not really clear, separating lines between home and work anymore. I don't know what it is. I'm not really sure. I'm not sure whether the work from

home arrangements, I don't know if that's helped or hurt employee burnout. I don't know. I can kind of see it both ways.

At least for me, I mean, there is definitely much less of a cutoff. The end of the day used to be seven o'clock you left the office or whenever and went home and you might answer some emails, but just generally speaking, at least for me, when I left the office, you had a much stronger boundary and end of day, where now it just sort of bleeds over and you might take a couple hours to go to the gym or eat dinner or whatever, and then you're kind of back at it. There aren't those real clear boundaries. So I don't know if that's helping or hurting.

Kristie Klein:

I agree. I do feel like there is more burnout now than ever. I don't know if that's still maybe just a consequence of the pandemic and maybe things will ease up. I agree with Evan, these hybrid arrangements we have now for a lot of our workforce, there are pros and there are also cons. It'll be interesting. I think the truth of all of this is yet to be told and we'll get there, but honestly, if someone were to ask me how this will all end up post-pandemic or how this hybrid work arrangement will ultimately land, I don't know the answer to that.

Evan Gibbs:

Same here. Because I wonder too, the work from home stuff is definitely a huge impact, but we're at such a... I don't know what the word is, but there are all the good culture wars and things where people are so divided. I mean there are so many other things going on in the world that are anxiety inducing and stressful to people that it's hard to really separate out, okay, is it because people don't have as much separation between home and work or is it all of this other crazy stuff that's going on out in the world?

Tracey Diamond:

Or maybe it's all of it, right? All of the above. Or lack of socialization. Employees are more siloed than ever because they're working from home so they're not getting together and that's soft stuff, right? Meeting at the "water cooler," just to toss around some ideas, which really helps ease some of those pressures cause it makes you feel less alone.

Kristie, I'm kind of curious. You work for a big company. Have you seen any resources that the company has put in place both to acknowledge and to help employees with the ease of employee burnout?

Kristie Klein:

Yeah, I think a lot of large companies, the focus has been on flexibility, acknowledging that these are new times and trying to really be flexible with people, especially families with young children, flexible with childcare, school situations. In Atlanta, we just had, I think kind of to Evan's point on the external impacting the workforce burnout, we just had a shooting happen not too far from-

Tracey Diamond:

I heard about that.

Kristie Klein:

... From where our headquarters are, and so traditionally we do what I think all employers do, is you send out the EAP resources, have counselors on site for things like that. I think for burnout, we are lucky that we have a wellness team that goes around and provide stress relief-type exercises. Right before the pandemic, we got a company dog that comes around that people can see and pet and play with, which I think helps reduce stress at the workplace.

Tracey Diamond:

That's awesome.

Evan Gibbs:

We need that. That's a great idea.

Tracey Diamond:

Yeah, it really is. Who takes the dog home at night?

Kristie Klein:

The dog's name is Murphy. At first some different HR folks took the dog home. The dog had to get trained, so the dog made some appearances, but now Murphy travels around. When you have those teen meetings, Murphy will come. And so we are trying to be creative like a lot of employers. I think we have still our guiding principle of let's continue to be flexible in these times and not too rigid.

Even with our hybrid work schedule, our executives really have difficulty balancing wanting to set clear expectations of how many days we want employees in the office for those that are hybrid versus maintaining that flexibility. And so I think it's been difficult to make clear what our expectations are, but also maintain that flexibility and acknowledge that some people aren't going to come in three days a week even if you tell them to, and then what are we going to do?

Tracey Diamond:

What strikes me from what you just said is that's the tension for any leader in any category. That tension between setting clear expectations and having flexibility. So it's very interesting to hear it applied in this area.

Evan Gibbs:

Well, I love the company dog approach.

Tracey Diamond:

Me too.

Evan Gibbs:

That is the first time I've heard that.

Tracey Diamond:

It reminds you of when we had a classroom rabbit when I was in kindergarten and every kid had an opportunity to take the rabbit home, and I remember I had the rabbit for some holiday and it got lost somewhere underneath this playhouse in my basement and didn't come out for three days and I thought I'd killed the rabbit.

Evan Gibbs:

Oh my gosh. Oh, man.

Tracey Diamond:

The rabbit's okay, though no rabbit was killed in the making of this podcast. Let's go to our next clip. In our next clip, Danny crashes a party at Amy's house and pulls her aside for a rare, honest conversation about the elusiveness of happiness.

Amy:

What do you need?

Danny:

I just want to know if you're like, I don't know, happy and...

Amy:

What?

Danny:

All your hard work paid off, right? You're fulfilled.

Amy:

Why do you care?

Danny:

I just want to know if I got to get to where you are.

Amy:

Everything fades. Nothing less. We're just a snake eating its own tail.

Danny:

Word.

Amy:

Just leave, please.

Tracey Diamond:

One of the things about Beef that struck me is that Amy is a fairly well-to-do entrepreneur with a family, a husband, a child, and Danny is poor, struggling, no social network really, other than his brother who doesn't really pay him the time of day, and his cousin, who seems to be bad news. Has much less of the sort of social construct that Amy does in her life and certainly less money, and yet they're both so deeply unhappy. And it made me think about, what do you think contributes to happiness at work?

Evan Gibbs:

Well, I can say I think one of the things is that people are engaged in what they're doing and they actually enjoy it. I think that's a big part of it, at least from my perspective. There are certain aspects of my practice over the years that I've enjoyed, certain things more than others, and so I tried to focus on the things that I like the most. And that's been a huge thing for me towards increasing the happiness at work is just trying to as much as possible, do the stuff that I enjoy because it does make the day go by much quicker.

Tracey Diamond:

As I tell my kids all the time, though it is work.

Evan Gibbs:

Yep.

Tracey Diamond:

It's not play, right? There are going to be aspects of your job that you're not going to like because it's work. How do you keep employees motivated to do some of the part of their jobs that they really don't like so much?

Kristie Klein:

I think that's a great question. One of the things that struck me about Danny and Amy, even though they were in such different positions in society at work is they're both hustlers. They both seem to have a chip on their shoulder, they're both striving for more and they just can't quite get there. For Danny, that's on the line of survival and being able to just take care of himself and his family, and for Amy, it's just trying to sell her business so that she can maybe spend more time with her kid, although it's unclear if that's really what she wants, but she's clearly aiming for something.

I think one of the things as a company that's difficult is you have certain employees that even if they're happy with what they're doing, even when they have a sense of purpose, they're always looking up for the next step on the ladder. And so those I think sometimes are the employees that are the most difficult to keep happy because they get to one spot and they're already aiming to get to the next spot and climbing that ladder and a little bit of that chip on their shoulder.

I think there are employees, to Evan's point, that if they like what they're doing and they're good at it and they're content where they are, those are great for employee morale, for everyone around them. There's that lack of competitiveness that you can sometimes get between employees. The balance of your strivers with those folks I think is a key secret sauce in having a happy employee morale team that works well together. But it's hard.

Evan Gibbs:

Yeah, and it's interesting because, just my personal opinion, but it feels like there is a real, and it may have always been like this, but I perceive that generally in most corporate cultures that there is sort of an expectation that if you don't have that striving mindset, always striving for the next level, that you sort of get overlooked and that you're perceived as not as valuable and that-

Tracey Diamond:

You're not ambitious enough.

Evan Gibbs:

Yeah, exactly. You're not ambitious enough. And so I think in most, if not all workplaces, there's that sense of that expectation of ambition. And I think that probably also, we were talking earlier about things that contribute to anxiety, I think that's probably a part of it because there's a real expectation. Nobody's just going to get a job and stay with a company for their whole career. They're not going to just get this one job and have it and be happy and stick with it. There's this expectation that you've got to climb in your current role and then lateral to move up. And I think that probably contributes to a lot of employee unhappiness. Maybe they don't want to do that and they're fine just sitting in the job, but they feel they have to artificially create this impression that they have all this ambition.

Tracey Diamond:

Maybe from the company's perspective, one of the answers is celebrating the successes more. When employees do achieve successes, rather than just... You know, a salesperson, they meet a goal and then all of a sudden, the goal is now increased, right? Your reward for meeting that goal is now you have a harder goal to hit, so you feel like you're always being set up to reach that point where you're going to fail. And maybe the answer is we need to take a breath when those successes are achieved and celebrate them so that employees feel like they are being heard and seen.

I do think that we grow up, and I know our kids are growing up in a society where everybody expects an award for participation. There's those attaboy awards, but maybe there's something to that and maybe the new generation of workers coming in without those expectations, maybe there was something to be said for that, that we don't always feel like you have to strive to the next thing. At least not this very second, and that we take a breath and just sort of celebrate what is accomplished to date.

Kristie Klein:

I agree 100%. I think that's something our company, a lot of companies are striving to do is to be more thoughtful and thankful and recognize not at the end of the year with your merit increase or the expected bonus, but we have spot bonuses, which I think can go a long way to having an employee feel recognized. Prior to the company I'm at now, I was with a hospitality company and that company rewarded its employees, particularly sales folks, with incentive trips, but also did a good job of pitching to other companies, "Why don't you guys send your good workers on incentive trips and we have the spots for you." I think there's a lot of different creative ways you can recognize good work without necessarily climbing up that corporate ladder.

Tracey Diamond:

And maybe you combine them both so that the employees are now motivated and there's less burnout, so they're motivated to climb to that next level in the corporate ladder.

Evan Gibbs:

Yeah.

Tracey Diamond:

My son works at a large company and he gets these little pieces of paper that are just little employee acknowledgements once in a while when he's caught doing something kind to a customer or he's in the customer service area, or is caught helping out a department in a way that wasn't expected, and he's so proud of receiving these little pieces of paper.

They don't come with money. They're really just acknowledgements that he was seen doing something that was a little bit of an extra effort. He usually takes a picture of it, he posts it on his Facebook page, he gets 100 people liking it, and it's a wonderful thing. It, in a viral way, continues to reward him exponentially. So some of us, it's a little things that really make a difference.

Evan Gibbs:

Yeah, I agree.

Tracey Diamond:

So are there other things that you see companies doing that foster a sense of ownership in their employees? Maybe on the monetary or benefits front, whether it's stock or other forms of equity where employees feel like they're buying into the mission of the company?

Kristie Klein:

I will say, the story of your son, I think one of the things that can get lost in the phrase sometimes is you create this new recognition program and then leaders feel compelled to do it and they give it, but it's not authentic, right? Your son is feeling rewarded for something he actually did, and I think that's the key to focus on, on the recognition is, don't give recognition for recognition's sake, because everybody knows, well, that's not anything and show me the money instead.

Tracey Diamond:

Right.

Kristie Klein:

But that company hit the nail on the head of more authentic recognition, and that's difficult to create, but I think that's what companies need to aim for because it's really incentivizing the behavior you want versus just incentivizing, let's recognize for recognition's sake.

Tracey Diamond:

Yeah, I agree with you. If there are any takeaways from today, I think it's when you're looking at employee burnout, you want to set clear expectations so employees understand what is expected of them and then provide that authentic one-on-one reward system. And again, take a breath so that

employees feel like they've achieved, and it's not just, all right, we've hit that, so now it's the next one and the next one and the next one without celebrating those achievements along the way. And then make sure you have a dog in the workplace because who doesn't want a puppy to pet?

Kristie Klein:

I mean, don't you think had Danny or Amy had a dog next to them in their car, this whole show might not have happened?

Tracey Diamond:

Absolutely.

Evan Gibbs:

I think that's right. I think that is exactly right.

Tracey Diamond:

Well, listen, Kristie, this was so much fun. I really appreciate you joining us today. And it was great seeing you, Evan, as always. Thank you so much to our listeners. Be sure to tune in to all of our podcast episodes. Let us know what you think, and also take a look at our blog, hiringtofiring.law. Thanks, everybody.

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