

Episode 19

Elizabeth

Sally, welcome to the Women In Product podcast. It's great to have you here today. I'm so excited to talk to you about this topic area of really how can women have a great career and have a life also. I think that's something all of us want to really understand and feel like certainly over the last couple years we've been struggling with. These days we're hearing so much from women about burnout and the challenges of balancing their lives. Do the demands of professional work put an unrealistic burden on women?

Sally

Yes. That's the quick answer. Yes. The data are clear. McKinsey has data. Gallup has data. Google it and choose your favorite source, because pretty much it's all a green. It's data that is aligned. The reason essentially is culturally, we have not evolved from the fact that we believe women at as the primary caregivers. We take care of young children. We take care of Asian parents. We certainly take care of even our partners or spouses, often our pets.

Now, this is not universally true, and so you'll find people who'll be like, "Well, I can tell you about the outlier." When we look at the data for women, we want to look at the bell curve and the bell curve are that women, particularly white women are burned out. I did actually have a fantastic conversation with an author of a book that we should all know, called *The First, the Few, the Only*. Her name is Deepa Puru. I cannot pronounce her last name, but she said I could just say Deepa Puru, P-U-R-U.

Elizabeth

Yes.

Sally

What we know to be true in the data are that for white women, it is burnout from this caregiving situation. What we know more about people of color, women of color is that it's almost trauma. It's gone from burnout to such a challenge because you have not only the pandemic, but you have all of the awareness rising with George Floyd's murder that the people of color, women of color, we call that intersectionality in social science, where you have the gender imbalance at work and then you add another layer of people of color, women of color.

It's really important to know the data because then we can be more conscious and intentional of how do we create spaces for all women in all of the variants of what they're feeling at home and in work to be heard, seen, and released. That's the way that we move past burnout is first emotionally, you have to acknowledge what you're feeling. There's some fantastic books on burnout. It's scientific. It's not just like something's wrong with us and we're just not resilient enough.

Knowing your emotions, expressing your emotions and then being able to release them in a way that works chemically. This is exercise. This is journaling. There's lots of different ways of releasing the emotion that allow the emotion to process through and not just hold tight in your body. Then thinking systemically about it. There's the individual, what can you do, Elizabeth? What can I do, Sally, to lower burnout for myself? And then there's systemically on our team, how might we have more open,

vulnerable conversations, I'll sort of Brene brown, about what's needed in work? How do we prioritize differently? One of the key issues in burnout is the fact that the expectations are too high. We just have to think systemically and ask questions so we can support each other on teams where a lot of the burnout happens. Then when we have more healthy teams, you go back to your "home" life and you don't show up exhausted. That's the negative loop that we want to interrupt.

Elizabeth

Yeah. It brings up a question for me, which is, do these factors of burnout and trauma mostly affect women who have children and families, or do they also impact individual single women? Is it less there? Is it more? Is there sort of a spectrum there, I guess?

Sally

I actually haven't seen recent data on this. I'm sure it exists. What I've seen... not recently, pre pandemic is it absolutely had a line around caregiving. But however, I just spoke with a woman who does not have aging parents or young kids and is entirely burned out. This goes to the anecdotal versus the bell curve. I guess the way to think of it is still women have an expectation of caring for others, even if you... in a work situation, there's no spouse typically in a work situation or kids or aging parents. But even in work situations, what we've seen in the research is that women are asked to do more, what they call housekeeping like, "Hey, can you keep the notes for this? Or can you organize our next offsite?" Things that typically are not about getting a promotion. It's on a developmental activity.

We do see that women in work situations that have to do with caregiving still feel more burdened because of these cultural norms that we can't just check at the door when we're on a team. We just know its, to your point, a spectrum, it's compounding if you have multiple things that you are caring for. But yeah. In fact, I had one friend who got a dog to just have an excuse, this is pre pandemic, to leave the office because she always heard her sisters at work saying like, "Hey, I've got to do this thing, and it's caregiving related." I was like, "Of course, of course, she didn't have that." She was like, "I'm going to get a dog," because she needed an excuse to actually take care of herself. I think we just have to be open to the fact that all of us, no matter our home situations need to have time to sleep and exercise and be in relationship and read.

Elizabeth

I'm going to take a little detour here. This whole discussion about the additional work that women do at work, the housekeeping, I believe a lot of it arises from the belief that women are naturally caregivers. But it also extends to women's abilities in terms of social cohesion or group cohesion or a lot of other capabilities that it's not that men don't have them, some men do, but you see them really strongly in women.

One of the things that I have heard from women, which I think is true is that oftentimes those things... I'm discounting the things like, "It's somebody's birthday, can you go get the birthday cake?" But more things that knit the groups together in terms of communication. Those kinds of skills are always discounted and yet they're required actually for group success. This woman in particular raised the issue of like, "I want to elevate those skills as being valuable, as opposed to saying, 'I'm not going to do them.' I want the organization to recognize how those skills that I bring to the table actually make a huge difference for the team and value that." I don't know if you have any comment on that.

Sally

Yes. Oh my gosh. I love this topic so much. Yes. Okay. The first thing I would say is it's always about outcomes. If one of the outcomes for your team is good communication, high trust environment, high psychological safety, creative... what are the outcomes for your team? And then you have to think about what are the inputs that create those outputs? If some of the inputs are someone who's high empathy leading in a vulnerable way that creates psychological safety, well, we've seen the data, creativity rises, productivity rises, the outcomes are high.

If we value the inputs, the question is, how are you getting valued on your performance review. Is the fact that you create and lead in this way with these outcomes valued? One way to think about value is, does it show up on a performance review? Is it something that's celebrated in the organization? Because culture's made every day. If in a meeting some a female is leading a session and there's just all this great output and people are talking about great ideas and feeling safe and only attacking ideas and not humans that made the idea, then are we celebrating that person at the end and saying, "Thank you. That was a really fantastically productive meeting, and I feel so energized."

Are we recognizing in the moment and thereafter and on a performance reviews all the contributors to it. The other piece of data that's new is the World Economic Forum wrote the top skills for 2025, and on there is empathy and problem solving and resilience, and these things that used to be considered soft skills. The joke for me was always like, "Actually I think these things are really hard." But now they've actually been explicitly elevated as a top skill for 2025 because we know that all the other things are going to be taken over by machines.

What's going to keep us uniquely human and fantastically creative in what our best in highest use at work are these "soft" skills, because they're not soft. They're actually just a different way of looking at them. And unfortunately, language has is powerful and sticky. The fact that someone designated it a soft skill made it less than a coding skill, but actually we know that machines are going to code more code than humans are going to code. What matters is the human who asks the right question to think about what should be coded, and how do we solve it? That is shifting, but back to the stickiness of culture, it's very slow. It's really thinking about how do you change your performance reviews, outcome oriented and recognize how the skill landscape is shifting, and be one of those futurists who lives in the now.

Elizabeth

Yeah. It seems to me that also comes down to a few recommendations for women. One is if you're changing jobs or you're interviewing for a new job, probing and understanding what that potential employer really values, how those things happen is well worth their time. Also, for those women who are in higher level positions to start to inject into the system a discussion around those other types of skills and are we actually valuing them. Do we really track back and make sure that is getting injected into how we value performance?

Sally

This goes back to the fact that bias lives in systems. Most people, when they have implicit bias, this is not explicit bias, like I am explicitly excluding a group, but this is the implicit bias. It lives in systems. When we don't continually stay curious about updating our systems, and a big one is performance management; who gets promoted, who gets the salary increase, who gets hired, all of these key

decisions. If we're not actively reviewing like, "What have we learned recently in behavioral economics about this? And have we learned in DEI? And changing our system, then the bias stays. That's another like, "Okay, how might we apply science into systems to make it better and more human?"

Elizabeth

Yeah, exactly. To kind of go back to original... what we were talking about, what can women do to manage their careers and workload to make room for their personal lives? I mean, I think there's a ton of women out there struggling with trying to figure out how to do that.

Sally

This is going to be audience specific for this audience. This is an audience many of whom can afford leverage. This is not something I'd say to everyone. When your income exceeds what you can leverage out, you need to think about what can you leverage out? Meaning, I choose not to cook, it does not bring me joy, except for Christmas holiday or somebody like that. But what can you outsource that gives you more time to do the things that only you can uniquely do and you can afford because the way you're making money or you're investing in your career essentially makes that math work.

Here's what's interesting. There are so many women who can afford it and still won't do it. The reason is social science. It goes back to these norms. Well, I have one friend who's Indian American, and she's like, "I have to make my food. My parents expected of me." She's a 40 something year old woman and talking about whatever her parents expect of her.

We have to question the social norms and say, "Well, is it what I want to do, and how might I essentially buy time back" leverage is one that is just... And frankly, raising kids and taking care of aging parents too, it's like, how much do you need to do versus the fact that most people love to learn and be taken care of by multiple people. There's so much to gain when, for example, we had au pairs and our kids would learn a little bit of another language and another culture. I didn't have to play every game of monopoly with them to be a good parent. Just considering leverage and how it can be a win-win-win versus just kind of defaulting into this is what's expected of me socially, either in my family or in my culture, in my region.

The other thing I would say is we all have business plans. This is a group of highly educated women. We all have a plan for our team, our company, and we get it, and we have milestones and we're clear about it. I'm curious how many of us do that for our full lives? How many do that for your relationships, for your exercise. Whatever matters to in your full life be intentional, because I think, unfortunately, we get pulled into being these highly achieving doers in the work, and we don't want to apply those same skills to our full life. That's one.

One that I love that Brene Brown does is explicitly looking at the gender roles in your partnership. Brene Brown's married to a doctor. They're both highly educated, high demanding careers, and they explicitly looked and said, "What are all the tasks that we're doing agenda that actually don't make any sense.? Who's doing this, who's doing that? And let's be intentional instead of default."

Elizabeth

That's a great one. Thinking about what things you can outsource... now I'm just going to give you a little personal anecdote. Over the years I have learned that there are things that fill me up. I'll give you a good example. I love to garden. But what I learned over time is I don't like to be responsible for weekly maintenance of the entire landscape of our house.

Sally

Yes. Yes.

Elizabeth

That is not what gives me pleasure. That's what puts pressure on me. I've been very specific about what I do gardening wise. I've put these parameters around it, and it gives me the freedom to do the parts of it that I love and let go of all of the other stuff that's an obligation. I tried to dig through that and think about those little things to set it up so that I get the part of that I love, but not the part that makes me insane.

Sally

This is brilliant. I have a little blog on this called "Be a Behavioral Scientist." If we are all paying attention to where you were talking about, I get joy in this part of gardening, but not the other part of gardening. What happens is sometimes we accidentally default into, "I love to garden," and that becomes your identity. "I love to cook." Well, then you realize, "Well, actually I don't like it at all." If it is in congruent with your identity, it's exhausting, you have cognitive dissonance and you're spending time going like, "Why don't I feel good? I'm so opposed to feel good and I'm cooking, but I don't."

My suggestion is, all of us, be little behavioral scientists and just track your joy. Instead of making an identity, "I'm a gardener, I'm a cook," just track your joy. "I'm a joy finder." And you're like, "I love to cook on holidays." Well, the underneath that might be I have time, I'm doing it with other people, I'm not alone. I don't like to cook. Maybe more creative. There's all these reasons underneath it, scientific. We're like, "Oh, that's why."

But if you just become a little bit of tracking your joy, you'll start to notice, "Okay, this is where my energy feeds me and makes me a better human, and I feel like this day was well spent," versus, "I defaulted into it because either other people expect me to cook or because I told myself I'm a gardener, but my back hurts because I just picked weeds for three hours." You were doing that. I think the key is, how might we do that on a more lightweight, regular basis, so we're also weeding out the things, just to take that analogy further, that don't work for us anymore. Maybe you used to love it and also maybe you don't anymore. Sometimes that's really hard to realize like, "I don't want to do that anymore."

Elizabeth

Right. I got my thaw of it. I'm done. I can move on to company [crosstalk 00:20:34]. There is this recognition that you only have so many hours in a day and so many days in a week and so many weeks in a year and in your life, and you know that you can be done with something and move on and shift what is included because everything can't be. I think this kind of leads into the next question that I had, which

is we all have some innate fear that's saying no or creating some boundaries will have a negative impact on our careers or on our lives, do you think there's truth in that? Or how do we manage those expectations?

Sally

Yeah. The answer is, it absolutely depends on your audience. We can't say like, "Set your boundaries or say this," who is your audience. First is knowing the psychology of how our brains work. If my audience, if I'm saying no to my boss, my boss is expecting a yes. My audience is expecting complicity or support or however he or she thinks about it. In neuroscience we know that if we start with a no, it actually moves the blood to the back of your brain of the audience, the audience goes, "Wait, you just said no." Right. It puts the person in defense mode, fight or flight. Now they're going to fight you, or whatever, freeze or fight, whatever.

But you don't want them there. What you want to do is always start with yes with a boundary. You can say, "Oh," it doesn't have to actually be explicit yes. It's tonally a yes. It's body language, a yes. It's curiosity. When you move the other person, you're basically negotiating with and yourself staying curious into like, "Huh, I see why you're asking... Or "let me see if you're asking it for this reason. Let me understand." If you're in curious mode, they're in curious mode because we have mirror neurons. We're going to be firing off each other.

The answer is definitely you want to have your boundaries, but you want to approach the boundaries in a way that works for how humans work, which is, I want to feel heard first. Start with something positive or at least showing me that you are thinking about it and then you can bring in your boundaries, and have a conversation about it. If it's an explicit no, you can just imagine how that feels in your body. It's like ... certainly not in our nice culture. That goes back to where you live and the cultural norms, but typically speaking, doesn't matter where you live, neuroscience is neuroscience.

Start with a kind of like a yes and, or a "Ooh, let me think about that. Can we talk about this?" And then there's whole good blogs on boundaries of how do you do that in a really compassionate way. And the most important part is your compassionate to yourself, because when you say yes to someone, you're saying no to something in your life. You're taking on something from someone else. Only if it's a real yes is it a win. Otherwise you're saying no to something in your life. That's where you want to think about, "How do you keep it win-win and not feeling zero sum?"

Elizabeth

Given the last two years that we've been through, a huge percentage of tech workers, most of them, have been working from home. Has that made things better or worse?

Sally

The data are clear that it's both. What we've saved in like, "I don't have to commute and maybe I don't even have to shower every day," and all of these things, we've essentially translated into more work. What we've seen is that we actually haven't translated into... I actually exercise more. Now, there are out outliers. I want everyone to be like, "Well, that's not me or that's not my best friend." Fine. But as a whole, the data are, we've moved the savings of commuting and the things that we thought were wrote into what we hope is more productivity, but we've also found higher collaboration overload. Meaning,

there's more meetings. We're not really sure how to connect. We're figuring it out. Life is a series of experiments, and this is just another experiment.

It goes back to become your own behavioral scientist, which is start to pay attention to like, "Huh, is this working for us? What's better about remote?" In fact, I do have a blog on, if you're a hybrid team, here are four questions to ask your team. If you're a remote team, here are four... Because there's good parts to each one. Quick example: I work with biotech companies, they are in a lab.

Elizabeth

Yeah, exactly.

Sally

Right. They need to be in a lab. But I put in the questions for the people who need to be in office like, "Are there alternate times that can make it easier on their commutes?" There's ways in which we can still take, what did we learn about remote that we could just ask questions about for the people who need to be in the office?" Then vice versa. Some people in the office are like, "You know what, I really learned by just being in the room with other professionals who are doing a similar job, because I hear the way they're asking questions or I hear some of their insights and it's that side by side learning." We call it tacit knowledge. How you get tacit knowledge.

Well, you don't get that in remote work. If you're a remote team member, how might you create opportunities for tacit knowledge to be shared? Are there side by side Zoom times that's not all the time, but what amount works for your team? And just staying curious, knowing that scenario has its pluses and each scenario has its shadow side, and how do you optimize for the pluses and essentially design to minimize the shadow side. Another important one is DEI. I have a list of those questions for people who want to dive into it on my blog.

Elizabeth

Okay, great. We've talked a lot about this from the point of view of women, but as we transition here into, I don't know, everyone calls it a new normal, but I don't know that it's a new normal, I just think it's a new something. As we make a transition here, how should companies think about the needs of women specifically, and I think families overall? Families can be complex in a lot of different things. People that work in organizations have relationships and we can't act like that isn't the case. How should companies think about this?

Sally

The first is always to be data driven. It's going back to, we don't make assumptions about people like, "Oh, the women want to work more remotely." Well, that's true for many women. Is it true for the women on your team? Because I also know women who can't wait to get back into the office. Again, it's to not make assumptions. Even if you see overall data that we've been talking about, it's important to know what's true for your team. The first is asking people what they want, again, not making gender norm expectations either.

Elizabeth

Not making the norm that men don't want to work at home.

Sally

Exactly. Exactly. Especially because next generation men are definitely showing more active parenting and also even what we call gender. The fact that we've grouped people into two categories we've learned is pretty archaic. Anyway, be data driven, find out what's true for your team. And then frankly, that same blog, that's not very long, has the questions of how do you design for your team? Because it does make a difference as a leader to make sure that you are designing for what's right in your team. To your point, Elizabeth, there's not one answer and there's not a new normal, because it's all very different depending on what your team does, right?

Elizabeth

Yeah, absolutely. How should women think about this transition and what can they do proactively to ensure that their career doesn't overrun their lives, or the reverse?

Sally

Totally. Honestly, the analogy I give is oxygen mask first, because if women are not caring for themselves, the reason we say it on an airplane is because we are so trained to be other oriented. And this is not by birth. We didn't grow up taking care of other people, we're taught to take care of other people. We have to teach ourselves back. It's like unlearning and re-skilling that actually things like self care, which were words that I just had an allergy too, for most of my life. Oxygen mask first are my words because when you care for yourself, you are able to do your best work. You are able to care for others. You are able to keep learning and growing and having fun in this one magical life that you have.

The way that I think of it too is a muscle, because even though this is part of my job is to teach this stuff, the reason I teach this stuff is the exact reason you would expect, which is I need it. I need to think about it. I need to cultivate it. It's a muscle. Just because I know it intellectual, we know that knowing does not translate into doing. It's the knowing doing gap. It's creating yourself... Basically staying curious, building in a muscle and then frankly, make sure you have other people around you, because we're so social, who support that.

If you have people who are saying, "What, you took a nap? Seriously? Are you not engaged in your job? Versus someone who says, "Oh my God, you took a nap? What were your creative ideas after?" They're just very different. Who are you surrounding yourself, and does it enhance your wellbeing or are you depleted because some people need to be fired from your inner circle?

Elizabeth

Sally, it's been so great talking to you. I'd really like to close today with a challenge for our audience. I think both you and we'd like to hear what concrete action women in product out there are going to take to have better balance, right?

Sally

Yes.

Elizabeth

Okay. We're going to challenge all of you out there to post to Instagram, what concrete actions are you going to take to have better work life balance? We'd like you to use the hashtag #W-I-P, wipfullife. Once

again, hashtag, #W-I-Pfullife. Let's share the ideas and cheer each other on to finding a better balance, a better work life blend. It's never a perfect balance. Let's not get hung up on perfection. We'll work on progress.

Sally

Well, and then this is the reason just choose one because we know the science of habits is progress and one at a time. This is why when we make it social, it's going to be more impactful for you and your friends. Bring someone along with you on the challenge. If yours is going to be boundaries, leveraging neuroscience, or whatever it's going to be for you, I'm curious to hear what the community has to say, and then I would love to see how we support each other, because it's a muscle. We need it more than just in one podcast. We need to keep the conversation alive and keep growing and living full lives together.

Elizabeth

I think that's the perfect place to end.

Sally

Thank you. It was a joy.

Elizabeth

It was a joy talking to you, Sally. Thank you so much. I know so many women in our community are going to really get a lot out of hearing this.

Sally

I hope so.