

Hiring to Firing Podcast — Fostering Teamwork: Lessons From the Dynamic Duo of Monsters, Inc.

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Guest: Emily Golden

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[INTRODUCTION]

Tracey Diamond:

Emily, for today's episode, as you know, we're talking about fostering teamwork and using as our example, the very famous team of Sully and Mike Wazowski from *Monsters, Inc.* Can you think of any other famous animated teams?

Emily Schifter:

Well, I know in a recent episode, we talked about a non-animated team, the very famous Harry Potter and his two best friends, Ron and Hermione. But after a few weeks of downtime over the days with my almost two-year-old. I was reintroduced to Lightning McQueen and his tow truck friend Mater in *Cars*, Elsa and Anna from *Frozen*, the whole family in *The Incredibles* from mom, dad, baby sisters, little brother. It just seems like these movies are the perfect example of teamwork. But I really think that Mike and Sully are kind of the most famous and are going to be perfect for us to highlight this topic.

Tracey Diamond:

So, listen in to this episode of Fostering Teamwork with Sully and Mike Wazowski.

[EPISODE]

Tracey Diamond:

Welcome to *Hiring to Firing*, the podcast. I'm Tracey Diamond, a Labor and Employment Partner at Troutman Pepper Locke, and I'm here with my partner, Emily Schifter. Together, we handle all employment issues from *Hiring to Firing*. Today, our guest is Emily Golden, Founder, CEO, and Strategic Talent Advisor of Golden Resources. Emily is also a speaker, facilitator, executive coach, and author of the book, *The New Golden Rule*. Emily, it's so nice to have you on our program. Thank you for joining us.

Emily Golden:

Thank you so much for having me today. I'm really excited to be here.

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Tracey Diamond:

Why don't you tell us a bit about your background, your company, and the work that you do?

Emily Golden:

Sure. I spent the first 17 years of my career climbing the ladder in corporate. So, I was working in corporate HR, only to realize that my ladder was up against the wrong building. I started to explore other career options while I was still working in corporate HR and found coaching. I became quickly enamored with it, went through a coach training program while still working full-time, and was very fortunate as I was able to build my coaching practice relatively quickly.

By 2016, I was a year into my coaching. I hung my shingle with Golden Resources and really officially began the business. That was nine years ago, and we have been growing our capabilities and the work that we do, which is essentially providing strategic talent advisory to small and mid-sized organizations across all industries. We really are passionate about developing and up leveling talent to support individuals and teams to reach their full potential.

Emily Schifter:

That's fascinating. I'm sure your our background gave you plenty of expertise, and good fodder for that. I mean, you're coaching career too.

Emily Golden:

For sure.

Emily Schifter:

Well, always great to have another Emily on board. So, our topic for this episode is fostering teamwork. Emily, you've worked with a lot of teams and team leaders. What are some of the characteristics of good teamwork in your mind?

Emily Golden:

So, this topic is one that is so near and dear to my heart, because at the end of the day, it is our people, and more specifically, our teams that get the work done, and that innovate. What I have found through my work is, I'll say five different key characteristics of effective teams. The first is clear communication, open, honest, communication, active listening. The second is shared goals, so this cannot be overstated. If there is not a unified vision and commitment, a team will quickly lose its focus. The third is that there are defined roles within the team. So, clear responsibilities, this just make sure that everyone knows what they're doing, it avoids confusion.

The fourth area I would say is, and this is probably predictable as an executive coach, but emotional intelligence. So, awareness, empathy, and understanding across the team is critically important. Then finally, I'll say, continuous improvement. So, as a team, regularly reflecting on

where we've been and then how can we grow and evolve into the next project, the next initiative.

Tracey Diamond:

I'm glad you added that last one because as you were naming the other characteristics of a good team, I was thinking to myself, that sounds like a tall order and something that really requires you to step back and look back and forward in terms of making sure that your team is staying on task, I would think. And making sure that you're meeting all of those prongs continually, because I would think you could start off that way, and then, maybe things will start to slide off or off, and it's time to sort of reevaluate and pull it back again. Do you find that that happens?

Emily Golden:

Reliably and consistently. So, teams come together, they get aligned, everything is humming along. Then, something could happen inside the organization, outside the organization, or just simply time pulls at people. So, it's so important that we're coming back together and regularly reflecting on where we are, where we've been, and how do we set the course for moving forward?

Tracey Diamond:

So, for our topic today as we always do, we like to pull from a TV show or movie to illustrate our concept. Today, we are pulling from our favorite monsters in the film *Monsters, Inc.*, Sully and Mike Wazowski. These two monsters give us much fodder for discussion. For those of you who don't remember or don't know, *Monsters, Inc.* is a 2000 – or the original *Monsters, Inc.*, I should say, is a 2001 animated movie produced by Walt Disney's Pixar Animation Studios and featuring the voices of John Goodman as the cuddly hairy Sully, and his co-worker and best friend, Mike Wazowski, as a small, green, one-eyed, sidekick voiced by none other than Billy Crystal.

Sully and Wazowski work at a factory that scares human children to harness their screams for energy, and somehow, they make that look even a little bit cuddly. Sully is the factory's ace-scarer, and in our clip, some of their more junior co-workers and fan base greet Sully. Let's take a listen.

[VIDEO CLIP STARTS]

Ricky:

Good morning, Sully.

Sully:

Good morning, Ricky.

Unidentified Speaker:

Hey, it's a seltzer.

Sully:

See you on the scare floor, buddy.

Mike:

Hey, Maude. Hey, how is jury duty?

Unidentified Speaker:

Good morning, Sully.

Unidentified Speaker:

How you doing, big guy.

Sully:

Hey.

Unidentified Speaker:

Hey, it's still leaning to the left.

Unidentified Speaker:

It is not.

Sully:

Hey, fellas. Hey, Jerry.

Jerry:

Good morning.

Unidentified Speaker:

Hey, Mr. Sullivan.

Sully:

Guys, I told you, call me Sully.

Unidentified Speaker:

I don't think so. We just wanted to wish you good luck today.

Mike:

Hey, hey, hey, hey, come on, get lost, you two. You're making him lose his focus.

Unidentified Speaker:

Oh, sorry.

Sully:

See you later, fellas.

Unidentified Speaker:

Go get him, Mr. Sullivan.

Unidentified Speaker:

Quiet, you're make him lose his focus.

Unidentified Speaker:

Oh no, sorry.

Unidentified Speaker:

Shut up.

[VIDEO CLIP ENDS]

Emily Schifter:

Sully is a role model at Monsters Incorporated with his ace scaring, and many of the other monsters look up to him. So, do you think, Emily, that having a team leader, someone like Sully is important to fostering teamwork?

Emily Golden:

Absolutely. A team leader who members look up to is really beneficial for fostering teamwork. A few things that a respected leader can do. First, inspire trust and confidence. Team members are more likely to follow the lead of someone that they truly admire and that they trust. A great leader can set the direction. I alluded to this before. Having a clear vision, purpose, and purpose and mission guide the team, keeping the team focused. A third attribute that really supports when you have a great team leader is that, that leader is modeling the desired behavior that we want to see in the team. So, leaders who demonstrate accountability, respect, and collaboration set the standard for the team culture to emulate that.

Emily Schifter:

I think that's so true, because it's important to have a leader who's got that leadership ability, who's leading the team, and thinking through how to manage others. But I think you're equally right, that leading by example, just by being great at what you do, is equally important, especially when you've got a team with lots of different levels of experience or expertise.

Tracey Diamond:

I want to take a moment though to talk a little bit about the role model part of the team leader as opposed to the management part. Emily, how do you choose a team lead in a way that that person is going to achieve that respect that we're looking for in a team leader and not foster resentments or jealousy amongst the rest of the team that, when they may have all wanted to be the team lead.

Emily Golden:

Often, the team lead is selected outside of the team. So, it's typically not in most environments that the team is electing the leader. A few things that the team lead can do, and this is especially important if the team lead was once a peer, and has now become the manager. Working individually – so, that team lead can work individually with each person on the team to really foster relationship, get to know each of the individual players. And to be clear, that team lead, just because that person is in the leadership position doesn't mean that they have all the answers. So, really honoring that each individual brings something unique and creates the collective power of the team.

Tracey Diamond:

So, making sure that the rest of the team gets the mission and where their value is in the mission so that they feel valued as an employee, even if they're the worker person and not the lead person. Is that what you're saying?

Emily Golden:

Absolutely. Look, not everyone wants to be in that lead role, and some people will want to be, and there might be some resentment that is bubbling up. As the team lead, if you are sensing

that, I am always a fan of having the direct conversation, not in a public forum, but bringing that to the individual, and just getting out onto the table what it is that might be in the other person's space that needs to be cleared.

Sometimes, it's just a matter of working through, it takes a little bit of time. But it is absolutely possible that there can be resentment. I see that less often than I see something else, which is where I thought you were going, which is that a leader is admired to such an extent that the team becomes dependent upon that leader, and that the team struggles to actually function in the absence of that leader. They can't function collaboratively in the absence of that leader.

Tracey Diamond:

How do you avoid the leader from becoming so indispensable that the team can't function when that poor leader takes vacation?

Emily Golden:

Exactly, it's a great question. First of all, you want to be giving autonomy, and trusting the individuals on the team to make decisions, and to lead some parts of the project, so that it's not all falling on one person, the team lead. You want to provide growth opportunities inside the team, so that there's an opportunity for individuals to stretch, and try new things. It's important also to be recognizing the contributions of each of the individuals on the team. When someone is acknowledged for work that they're doing, they want to do more of it because they feel great, they feel valued. Other things like encouraging collaboration, so helping people to really work together and acknowledging that team performance when you see it, listening and supporting. This is definitely an area to watch out for. As a leader of a team, it's critically important that you are keeping your finger on the pulse that the team is not overly dependent upon you.

Emily Schifter:

Brings back a lot of the things we talked about in a prior episode on succession planning. Tracey, definitely, important to think about when you've got that one person. And Emily, you also made me wonder about the idea of kind of an informal leadership role for other individuals. Maybe somebody, they're not the manager, but maybe they have some sort of an informal role. Obviously, you don't want to overburden somebody and give them extra job duties when they're not the leader. But have you ever seen that kind of a structure work?

Emily Golden:

For sure. I am a big believer that leadership is a way of being, not a title necessarily. So, a great leader is defined as someone who is empowering the people on the team to step up and take on more responsibility. So, yes, of course, we don't want to be giving responsibilities that are the team leaders to the individuals. But often, you'll see, in a team, a few people who are really rising up and hungry to make a big impact.

Tracey Diamond:

It's really interesting, because I've seen this time and again with my clients, where an employee is a terrific worker. They're really good at what they do. To Sully's example, they're incredibly good at scaring children. But then, when they become the leader, the actual manager of the other workers, the other scammers, let's say, they don't have the management skills because they've never been taught management skills. They've only been taught the skills of doing the actual work. I think that transition from team member to team leader can sometimes be very difficult and challenging for the team leaders. I also think that it can be difficult for the leader of the team leads to figure out who's going to be able to possess those good management skills and be able to lead. It might not necessarily be the person who's best at the doing. Have you found that to be an issue?

Emily Golden:

Absolutely. So, you've got these technical experts, and then, we promote them into the leadership role, and they find themselves floundering, they find themselves really unhappy, and it comes down to a lack of training as a leader of people. Also, sometimes, there isn't really that desire there. The individual just feels like that's the next natural path. So, they step into that leadership role.

I have seen in situations where a person has moved into a lead role, and after six months, a year, raised their hand and said, "This is not actually the best fit for me, and it's not in the highest and best interests of the organization. I'm going to step back and let someone else lead."

Tracey Diamond:

So, on the issue of role models, let's take a listen to our next clip, which is a similar issue of what makes a good role model, where the owner of Monsters, Incorporated asks Sully to show the trainees how it's done.

[VIDEO CLIP STARTS]

Mr. Waternoose:

Sully, I could use your help with something.

Sully:

Anything, sir.

Mr. Waternoose:

You see, we've hired some new scare recruits, and frankly, they're –

Sully:

Inexperienced?

Mr. Waternoose:

They stink. I thought maybe you might come by tomorrow and give them a demonstration. Show them what it takes to be a top scarer, huh?

Sully:

I'll start out with the old Waternoose jump and growl.

Mr. Waternoose:

Yes. Now, that's my boy.

[VIDEO CLIP ENDS]

Emily Schifter:

The monsters at Monsters Incorporated have engaged in a competition for the top scary monster. Is competition a good way to motivate employees and make them work harder? Can it lead to innovation?

Emily Golden:

So, competition can absolutely be a motivating factor for some employees, but it doesn't always work best. It's not necessarily the best approach for everyone, for every situation. When competition can be beneficial, so I have a few examples. First is when you are incentivizing high performance. When employees push themselves harder to win rewards, recognition, or bonuses, you see this with sales, business development, that kind of thing. Another place that competition can be healthy is when it promotes innovation. So, healthy competition can definitely drive creativity and new ideas to stand out.

I think what comes to mind is, Google is kind of famous for this, creating – I don't know the specifics. It's been a while since I've tapped into that, but different pods that are working on solving the same problem, but they're in different groups. Some employees thrive in competitive environments, and it actually supports them to stay more engaged and more focused, so it can be a way to boost engagement. It can also foster this healthy rivalry where teams create energy and excitement around achieving a specific goal. Of course, there are downsides.

Tracey Diamond:

What are those downsides?

Emily Golden:

So, it can be harmful in that it can create too much stress. So, too much competition can actually lead to burnout, anxiety, unhealthy work dynamics. I've seen it damage collaboration. So, employees become more focused on an individual success, and they're forgetting about the actual team and the team cooperation. I've seen in instances where it can lead to resentment. If competition is unfair, or maybe rewards are uneven, it can cause friction and actually lower morale.

Finally, I'll say, decreased job satisfaction. Some employees are going to feel demotivated if they don't perform well in a competitive environment. Again, that will lead to disengagement, but they'll have decreased job satisfaction.

Tracey Diamond:

I guess something to think about when leaders are deciding whether or not to put a competition in place. Is this a healthy form of competition or is this going to create dissatisfaction, and maybe monitoring the competition to see if it's getting the intended results.

Emily Golden:

Precisely. I would not shy away from it necessarily. I would be extremely intentional about it, and continue as we shared earlier, continue to check in with, is this a balanced approach that's working for everyone on the team?

Emily Schifter:

And knowing your team too, I can definitely see a competition being something that might bring out the wrong side of a particular personality. Maybe even one of those leaders who is a really great doer, but not so much of a great leader, maybe that would distract somebody. Whereas, somebody who needs to be brought out of their shell, it could be the perfect thing. I think, knowing your team is exactly right.

Emily Golden:

Also, having objective metrics for who's the winner of that competition so that there's less of a sense of favoritism coming into play.

Tracey Diamond:

Yes, absolutely. Well, shifting back to Mike and Sully a little bit, I think they're kind of one of the most famous animated Pixar duos out there. What do you think make them such a great team?

Emily Golden:

I just love them. So, they have different strengths, right? Mike is clever, resourceful, and he is a strong communicator. He handles logistics, organization, and problem solving. Then, Sully is

strong, physically imposing. He's got this natural charisma, and he's excellent at scaring. His heart is really in the right place, so, he often leads with his instincts, rather than with the planning and organization.

Emily Schifter:

Such a great breakdown.

Emily Golden:

There's also this mutual respect between the two of them, and they really respect one another's abilities. They recognize that they both have unique strengths that are vital to their success. I see that when a team can really connect to the strengths of the individuals and focus on those as opposed to focus on what isn't working or what isn't right, or the dreaded drama that comes into team dynamics often. It's really a game changer.

Tracey Diamond:

So, even though Mike and Sully are a great team, and I 100% agree with you that they are a great example of a good team, they have their ups and downs too. So, in the next clip, Mike is upset because he believes that Sully is throwing away everything they worked for in order to save the little girl that Sully's nicknamed, Boo, who had escaped into the monster world. Let's take a listen.

[VIDEO CLIP STARTS]

Mike:

Ever since that kid came in, you've ignored everything I've said. And now, look where we are. We were about to break the record, Sully. We would have had it made.

Sully:

None of that matters now.

Mike:

None of it matters? Wait a second. None of it Matters? Okay. That's it. No, good, great. So now, the truth comes out, doesn't it?

Yeti:

Oh, would you look at that? We're out of snow cones. Let me go outside make some more.

Mike:

Sully, what about everything we ever worked for? Does that matter, huh? What about Celia? I am never, never going to see her again. Doesn't that matter? And what about me? I'm your pal, I'm your best friend. Don't I matter?

Sully:

I'm sorry, Mike. I'm sorry we're stuck out here. I didn't mean for this to happen, but Boo's in trouble. I think there might be a way to save her if we can just get down to that –

Mike:

We? Whoa. We? No, there's no we this time, pal. If you want to go out there and freeze to death, you be my guest, because you're on your own.

[VIDEO CLIP ENDS]

Tracey Diamond:

What kind of leader do to manage individual relationships within a team to avoid infighting among teammates and make sure that everyone's working together instead of that crossroads?

Emily Golden:

Back to what I was saying before, really leveraging different strengths. This starts with identifying what the strengths are, and utilizing those strengths, and making sure that the role that the individual is playing taps in to their unique strengths. Then, encouraging skill development around the areas where there are gaps in skill. A leader can also support by building mutual respect. So, fostering this culture of respect, which starts from the leader, encouraging team members to really value, and appreciate each other's contribution.

I'm a huge fan of acknowledgement, so acknowledging the individual talents, individual perspectives. Acknowledging how an individual is showing up in a particular project or initiative. Then, of course, we've touched on this already, but a leader leading by example, modeling that respect, and that fairness is critically important.

Emily Schifter:

The last clip is a really good example of a couple of things, I think. One is, Sully is being maybe a little bit myopic in terms of, he's so focused on saving Boo. Of course, that's a really worthy goal and what was really needed at that moment. But he was doing it at the expense of his relationship with Mike Wazowski, and maybe not taking the time to explain the why as to what he's doing was so important.

Then, Mike Wazowski was sort of a little bit stuck in his own head in terms of what the past and what they've had until now. And the world is sort of changing around him, and changing very

quickly, and is unable to sort of step back and take a look at the future, in my opinion. So, it's a really interesting example of where team dynamics may change over time. The mission even may change over time, and how having an open mind, both on the part of the leader, and the team itself is so important, and focusing on the mission critical junctures.

Emily Golden:

Absolutely.

Tracey Diamond:

I think it's interesting too. You mentioned making sure that the people in the role are a good fit for the role. We've talked a lot about balancing strengths and weaknesses. So much of that is personality based or experience based, but do you see organizations having to take a look at actually how they're staffing teams and what roles they're putting on teams to make sure that they're setting themselves up for success even before we get into people's individual quirks

Emily Golden:

For sure. I'm always having a background in talent acquisition and talent management. I'm always asking the question, what is the role? What do we need this role to accomplish in the organization? And is the person that we have really the best fit? Often, it is yes, it's the right fit. Sometimes it's not. Then, how do we go while making sure that we can leverage that individual strengths, but maybe in a different position or in a different way.

Emily Schifter:

Absolutely.

Tracey Diamond:

So, in the movie, Sully and Mike learn ultimately that children's laughter is actually a better energy source than their screams, who knew? So, Mike and Sully end up reversing roles. Mike becomes the main humor source of making children laugh while Sully is now his assistant. Do you think that sort of role reversal could ever be successful in real life?

Emily Golden:

It's such a great question and it's kind of fun to watch. I do think that role reversal can be successful, and I also believe that it really requires careful planning and thoughtful execution to avoid resentment, right? So, clear communication and transparency, being intentional, like gradual about the transition, establishing new boundaries, and respect would be another area that I would say is important. I will say, when it comes to role reversal, some of the organizations I work with have mentoring programs.

I've done a bit of research around this reverse mentoring concept, where the mentee becomes the mentor on certain topics. One that comes to mind is, use of social media in marketing, for

example. There is a lot of value there, and I think we can't just assume because of the hierarchy that there isn't some great learning to be had. But role reversal, like the one we see here in "Monsters, Inc." It can work. It can be successful. And obviously, we just would need to be careful about it.

Tracey Diamond:

One of my favorite scenes in the movie is watching Billy Crystal's Mike Wazowski on his little stool acting as the one-man show for the little boy.

Emily Golden:

Yes, it's so great.

Tracey Diamond:

Emily, this has been certainly fun, and such a fun opportunity to talk about one of my favorite animated films. We really appreciate you joining us today. Thank you so much to our listeners for listening into *Hiring to Firing*. Please check out our other podcast episodes, and also check out our blog, hiringtofiring.law for all things *Hiring to Firing*. Thanks for listening.

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