TRANSCRIPT It's Not All Billable – Episode 5

Jonathan Bench: Kato, if I could pick a title for today's episode, I think I would call it "Networking to a Great Mentor." For me, that cuts two different ways. One is finding your mentors in your life. The other is becoming the mentor you think others need, or the mentor you wish you had had along the way. I don't know if that resonates with you, but that's how I would frame today's discussion.

Kato Aerts: Fully agreed.

Jonathan: Let's dive in. I'll give you a little bit of history of young Jonathan. And I wasn't that young. I started law school at 25. I think I was 30 years old when I started my first job, so I was about four years, plus or minus, in graduate school. This was 2008 to 2012.

LinkedIn had just landed, I believe, around 2008. The iPhone came out in 2007. So this was early technology days for a lot of us. In terms of the networked economy, they call this Web 2, where we went from Web 1, kind of mid-to-late '90s through the early 2000s, into Web 2, when things became more interconnected and people started using the internet as a network rather than just as a billboard to go and find information.

So I see this as early-to-mid Web 2, where we didn't really know what we didn't know yet. We just knew we had all this technology available, and it started to connect us with people. I think it was difficult for me at the time just to know what to do next. I went into law school with one child, we had another one in the middle, and then right before I took the bar exam, my third child was born.

So I had a lot of pressure on me at the time, tons of pressure. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know who to go to. There were so many things that I didn't know, and I felt like I didn't have very many resources either. I was coming in extremely ignorant into this process of mentoring.

I don't know if you had a different experience when you were trying to figure things out, but I know we talked in prior episodes about your time in law school and meeting, I think you said, a great group of lawyers over dinner. Maybe that was a watershed moment for you. But I'd be interested to hear about your origins for when you even started to think about this concept of networking and mentoring and building a network around you that could help you in your career.

Kato: Yeah, I think for me, I certainly didn't consider LinkedIn, or any other formal network, to be a resource for mentors. I do think that I have had mentors throughout my life, and not just in my career. Even when I was younger and in school, that didn't come from the

conscious decision of finding a mentor and walking up to someone I admired and saying, “Hey, do you want to be my mentor?”

It kind of gradually grew. I love to learn, so I’ve often asked advice from teachers, from people who were a few years older and had experience in something I wanted to gain experience in, and things like that. Very quickly, that left me with many, many people that I looked up to and could learn different things from. It was not institutionalized. It was not deliberate. It was not a very conscious decision. It was just curiosity, thinking, “Oh, these people can teach me something.”

But actually, now that I look at it with a more professional mindset of what a good mentor is, or what good mentorship would look like for a young lawyer, I really do think there are a lot of similarities with the model I just described. Choose several people you admire who can teach you different things, because it’s an illusion, I think, to just have one mentor in your life. I really do hope that young lawyers have many. Some can teach you business development. Others can teach you the content of the work. Then some others can teach you, in your private life, how to better balance your work and your family life.

That also confirms that mentorship isn’t just a professional thing. In life, they often say when you raise a kid, it takes a village. And I think just raising yourself in this world, becoming the best version of yourself that you can be, and becoming the best lawyer you can be, also takes a village. Just look around you. There are so many people who have experiences to share. And that’s the wonderful thing about it, I think. It’s almost like a menu that you can choose from. Nobody’s forcing anyone on you in terms of this person having to be your mentor.

Unless, of course, you put it in a more structural scenario where you’ve started at a law firm and you have a lawyer you’re working for. Then obviously, ideally, that person would be your mentor. But that’s not to say it’s always a great fit. Then, of course, you have to make a conscious decision about whether you’ll continue that or not. Otherwise, it really is a whole menu that you can choose from. You can wake up tomorrow morning thinking, “I want to deepen a certain skill,” and go on the hunt for a mentor.

Which then brings us to how you do that, which is probably something we’ll talk about later. But that’s a bit how I see it. It can be something very structural within a certain program or scheme, and there are many out there, but I think it’s also a way of life and an approach to connecting with people.

Jonathan: I like that. I think that reflects a lot of maturity about the way you look at the world. I think it took me a lot longer to figure out that I needed the village. Maybe it’s the Midwest work ethic, where we solve everything by working harder. Maybe it’s an American

thing as well. But I think in the Midwest especially, in the United States, there's a certain amount of self-reliance where you just know there's work to do.

I think I grew up thinking if I worked a little bit harder, I could probably figure this out myself. And that was true to some extent, but it wasn't absolutely true. There were a lot of times in my life when I look back and think I could have shortcutted that a lot. I could have saved myself a lot of grief, some tears, if I had been smart enough to think there's probably someone out there who has already walked this path that I want to walk.

I love how you talked about this concept that you can find a mentor for a lot of different aspects of your life. It doesn't have to just be professional. I think it's very healthy to think about that, going around looking. And I think there's a lot of power also in initiating these relationships. If you are the kind of person who is good at paying attention to others, recognizing their gifts and their talents, and going up and telling them, "I see what you're doing, and I appreciate it. Thank you for doing that for someone," there's a lot of power there. It doesn't even have to be something they've done for you. I think that viewpoint of gratitude and helping others recognize their gifts carries a lot of weight.

I had several great mentors along the way. Maybe I'll share a little bit about one of them now. His name is Brett Lechtenberg, and he wasn't even a lawyer. He was a business coach. I was in a networking group when I moved back to Utah. I didn't have a job. I was starting to work for myself for the first time after we had moved back from the East Coast.

As part of this networking group, called BNI, which stands for Business Network International, I learned a lot. The concept of BNI was born out of the '80s. There was a guy who was a business coach, and he wanted to build a network of people around him that he could refer his clients to. So he started these lunches, and from that it's grown into a worldwide organization. I believe there are local BNI chapters everywhere in the world.

The concept is that you have seat exclusivity. So, for instance, where we had a business coach, we had a real estate lawyer, a business lawyer, someone who bought swag, a marketing director, all kinds of things. The groups can get quite large. The one I was in was called BNI Goldmine here in Salt Lake City, and there were about 90 members, which was very large.

I remember I told you about one of my friends named Leslie Polk in the last episode. She was the accountant who reached out to me. She was part of this BNI group and had learned this concept of forming your own network and this category exclusivity. The goal is that you build this group around you, meet together weekly, and do business with members of the group. It's not always that you'll do business directly with them, but the idea is that

you amplify the network effect. Leslie might know someone, or three other people, who might want to hire me, and vice versa.

I might never do business with the painter in the group, but I might have friends who need the auto guy in the group. What I learned best out of this was finding the network partners who are most likely to give me referrals, and vice versa. That started to teach me the concept of this network.

So, a lot of backstory there, but within this group there was a business coach named Brett Lechtenberg. Brett and I had lunch because we were supposed to meet with members of the group one-on-one every week. You're supposed to choose one member of the group and get together with them outside the regular meeting to get to know each other better and understand how you can share business back and forth.

Brett said a lot of interesting things to me in our, I think, maybe only two interactions while I was in that group, because I later moved. But he said to me, "You will find that people at the top of their game are really willing to mentor young, smart people." I had never heard that concept before. I assumed that people who were at the top were too busy, or couldn't be bothered with younger people looking for a mentor.

So this is one of those things where I thought: if I hadn't listened to Brett, if I hadn't leaned into this group, my life now would be drastically different. I think I would probably still be trying to do things on my own. I also wouldn't have this view as a mentor now, where I'm mid-career and others come to me looking for mentorship. I'm glad that I learned from Brett that it's so important for us to look up to others, and when we get toward the middle, where people are looking up to us, that we don't consider ourselves too busy or too important to engage with them in a meaningful way.

Kato: I think that's very true. I once did a TED Talk internally in the law firm for our interns or students who were applying for an internship at the firm. It was actually a great concept that our HR manager came up with. It was basically five partners talking about things that are important for a lawyer that are not just the content of the work.

So I think one partner spoke about going from intern to law firm partner, how you get there. Then someone else talked about business development. Another one talked about emotional intelligence. And I spoke about mentorship.

While I was preparing for that presentation, I was really thinking: what is the main message that I want to give these students? And that was exactly it. Just don't be afraid to walk up to people. You'll be surprised how many people will actually like mentoring you.

It's as with anything in life. The worst possible thing that can happen is if somebody says, "I'm too busy, I can't do it." But then maybe they'll even direct you toward someone who can. So it really is a matter of going out there. Not because people don't want to give it spontaneously, but because it might not cross their mind. They might not even think that they would be a good mentor, or that they have a skill or something to teach you. But you're the one who's mapping out your future. You're the one who decides what you want to learn. So that actually makes you the best person to decide who you're going to ask to be your mentor.

One thing I was also thinking about when I was preparing for this talk is: what is a good mentor? What are the characteristics of a good mentor? And is it the same as a promoter? That means someone who is always pushing you for opportunities or presenting you in the best possible way to potential clients.

Because a promoter is, in my view, and I don't know if you agree with that, but in my talk I said a promoter is someone who carries your papers into a room that you aren't in. Someone who is ahead of you in some way or another, has some power, and can actually, by presenting you as a great candidate, a great person, a great lawyer, as someone capable of doing things the right way, help you advance your career.

But it's very important that a promoter is focused on the positive aspect of who you are, what you can do, what your talents are. Whereas a mentor, I think, is someone who is brutally honest and can also share the negative side of things, which is also super important. We've already touched on this in earlier episodes, but with imposter syndrome, it's hugely liberating to hear from someone you admire that they also struggle with uncertainties, that they've done things in the past they're not very proud of, or that they would have done differently. So I think mentoring is also about that more challenging aspect of whatever you're facing. What do you think?

Jonathan: I like that. I think a mentor definitely should be able to tell you when you get it wrong. The special part about that kind of relationship is that you don't get offended. There are people who will correct you in your life, and for me, it will just rub me the wrong way. I may know that they're right, but I'm not going to be happy about it, and it's not going to build our relationship.

Whereas if I have someone who I have designated as a mentor in my life, I'm willing to take all that criticism without question. I've already built that relationship of trust with them. I absolutely agree with you that I'm not going to do everything right, and I'm going to depend on you to tell me very candidly in the moment that I need to fix something. I've agreed with myself that I will not get bent out of shape if I get that kind of feedback from you.

That's a very hard conversation to have with yourself and with someone else, to give them that kind of power in your life. But I think it is absolutely important. And I think it's healthy for mentors as well to be in that kind of relationship.

I try to do that with my associates that I work with now. I try to be very upfront with them. I say, "Look, I was a dumb-dumb associate. I didn't know what I was doing. I made so many mistakes. And you will make mistakes, and we will get through it. None of your mistakes are going to be catastrophic. And if I ever come across like I'm not being kind to you or I'm not being thoughtful enough, please know that I'm probably just busy and haven't taken the time to package this feedback perfectly for you so I know it won't hurt your feelings. But I will tell you when you're wrong because I want you to be an exceptional lawyer, and you're already a very good lawyer."

It's funny because they are way more mature than I was. Overwhelmingly, the associates I work with now have told me that they won't be offended. They'll say, "No, absolutely. Give me the feedback. I want the hard feedback now. I don't want to have to guess at what I've gotten wrong or what I should have done differently."

Kato: It's a great mindset, but I also love how you are conscious, when you're working with your team, of the impact that you have. That could just be your mood when you walk into the office. I once heard someone say that if you look at the corporate ladder, all the way at the bottom emotions are high and impact is small, and then at the top of the ladder emotions are small but impact is very big.

That basically means if a law firm partner walks into the office and that morning had an argument with his wife, or got fined by a police officer, whatever it may be, and walks in annoyed, not in a good mood, the associates will likely feel that tension and be very impacted by it. They may think maybe today's not the right day to approach him with this draft, or maybe I should approach it differently, or maybe I did something wrong in the very worst-case scenario. So: high impact, low emotions.

Whereas on the lower side of the corporate ladder, the associate may walk in for the very same reason annoyed, but nobody will notice, or at least the law firm partner won't be impacted as much. But the emotions that they feel are very, very high and they need to process them. Because if you've received a draft full of red lines and the night before you probably felt like an imposter, then you walk in already afraid. So you have high emotions to manage, whereas the law firm partner being annoyed about the fine might shake it off in five minutes.

I really think that's such an interesting way to look at things, because that's exactly what I keep reminding myself as you progress in your career. The people who work with you and

who are starting out in their career go to bed at night thinking about the draft they sent to you. They wake up in the morning seeing if there was a revised version or if you made any comments. They live with that work so much more than we do because they're still learning.

I really pledged to myself to never forget that when I heard it, because I think it's such an important way to approach them, saying, "If I'm in a bad mood, probably 99% of the time it has nothing to do with you. Please don't be scared." Not that I'm walking around in a bad mood all the time. But I loved how you phrased that. Maybe it's a bit separate from the mentorship topic as such, but it's a good quality of a good mentor.

Jonathan: Actually, that fits perfectly with another one of my mentor stories. My managing partner at my first firm, his name was George Eaton, and he remembered what it was like to be a young, dumb lawyer. But he still sent me an email late one night, and it was a scathing email. I deserved it 100 percent, but it wasn't out of laziness. It was out of ignorance that I ended up in the situation.

He had sent me a purchase agreement and said, "I need you to prepare a closing agenda for this." I didn't really know what the purpose of the closing agenda was, and I wasn't even smart enough to know to ask the right follow-up questions. I just took it and thought, "Okay, I'll find what I can and do the best I can." It was not nearly good enough.

He taught me, not so gently but very importantly, that when I send work product to another lawyer, it had better be good. It had better be very good work product. I've tried to pass that on in a different way to my juniors, where I tell them, "Look, when we're doing a draft together, I don't want you to give me something that's just good enough, or that you think is good enough. I need you to give me something you think is near perfect, because we want to use this next time as our template document, as the next version, as the way that we've learned. If we don't get it right now, when we get to the situation next time where we need this, we're going to kick ourselves for not having put the work in now."

I try to remind myself of that too. I don't ever want to put anything out the door that's just halfway, or good enough, or almost good enough. I really want something to go out where, if I had to use this again tomorrow, I would be proud to know that I put the work into this. It is a hard lesson to learn.

Kato: It is, it is. But I think it's a really good way. That's a valuable lesson coming from a mentor, and exactly the kind of thing you're looking for when you're a young lawyer and learning on the job. These are the kinds of lessons you get from mentors through personal stories.

I don't know if you've added that personal story when you're explaining that to your associates.

Jonathan: I haven't yet, but I probably should, because it does humanize the experience quite a bit.

Kato: Well, it's on record now that you were a dumb-dumb associate, so they will use that against you.

Jonathan: That's right. It is. That's right.

How do you think about events? You and I spend a lot of time at events, and I think that's an opportunity for younger lawyers to interact with people they think are above them or where they want to be. You're kind of face-to-face, and it's extremely intimidating to approach someone in an open room, even for us, who I think are both quite outgoing.

But even then, it's hard to break into a conversation. It's hard to introduce yourself. What kind of tips do you have that you've seen done well or not well for approaching, whether it's in person or online? Let's stick to in person first, then we can go to the online version, because I think online there are some better options for people who may not feel like they can approach someone cold in an open room. But what advice do you have for either approaching or receiving someone who's approaching you as a potential mentor?

Kato: Well, to approach, the first step to approaching anyone, I think, is "done is better than perfect." Instead of just waiting for the right moment, the right question, the right first impression, or worrying what they'll think of you, just do it.

Especially when you're networking and walking into a room with many people you don't know, I always have the same feeling. It's kind of like a door you have to walk through, and you can find yourself on the other side of that door when you have an off day, when you're a bit tired, when you don't feel at the top of your game. Then you start arguing with yourself in your head: I'm not feeling it, today's not a good day. That's why I think done is better than perfect. Just walk up to the first person you see and start a conversation about the weather or whatever. Really. Once you get going, then you train a skill, you make a joke, somebody else joins the conversation.

I guess the same applies to finding a mentor. Obviously, that's not exactly the same as walking into a room filled with people you don't know yet. There, I'd recommend mapping out a little bit what skill or thing you want to learn about, who would be ideal, and how you would approach it in terms of what you're actually asking for. Do you want to have regular conversations with this person? Is it just a one-time conversation about a certain project that you're working on? Or should it be something that spans the course of a year? Or do

you even want to make it less formalistic and just say, “Hey, can I ask you for some advice?” and not even mention the word mentor?

So there I’d say map it out a bit. But then again, done is better than perfect. There is no perfect way to ask for it. There is no perfect time. Either they’ll say yes or no, and that’s the worst thing that can happen. Then you move on to the next person.

When it comes to being approached, I think it comes back to what I said in an earlier episode: just being generous. Even if you don’t have the capacity, just listen to what this person is asking you for. Obviously don’t say yes when you really don’t have the time to take on a mentee because you’re busy with other projects. But listen: why are they asking? Why do they think you would be the right mentor for them?

Then maybe recommend some other person, or recommend a book or a podcast like this one—making a self-promotion here. But genuinely, I often do that with my associates as well. When we talk about a certain topic, maybe in the car when we’re driving to a client or a court hearing, I don’t have all the resources in that moment to just dispense everything I’ve once heard or thought could be useful for them in that particular scenario. But I always think, okay, what can I now, off the top of my mind, say? Oh, there’s an interesting book I read about that. Or maybe you can reach out to that person or listen to this episode.

From there, they can do their own search, because that’s the beauty of technology, as you mentioned. There’s so much out there, so much that can be found. It doesn’t even require hours of work from an actual person if they just point you in the right direction.

Jonathan: I have a friend who is a consummate networker. He is absolutely amazing at doing this. I’ve been to conferences with him. He’s not a lawyer, but his habit is that anytime he goes to a panel or watches a speaker in person, he will go up afterward and tell the panelist or presenter what he enjoyed about what they shared.

He’s not necessarily looking for anything back, not necessarily looking for a mentor. But I think for people who are wondering what to say or how to open the conversation, you can start just by saying, “Thank you for being here and sharing your time with us.” That puts a lot of guards down initially.

I think everyone is busy, especially people who are on panels or doing keynotes. They’re very busy people. But at the same time, they are happy to know that their work is making an impact. I think we are all secretly looking for the next version of us, the next better version of us that we would like to mentor.

So I think that if you’re in the habit of doing that, of going up and, in a professional setting, just recognizing others for the contributions they’re giving, that’s an easy way to let the

guard down between you. Then it opens the door to doing a lot of things together: building your network, meeting interesting people, growing the group of people you can reach out to day or night with questions, concerns, or opportunities, whether about doing a podcast together or being at a conference together or anything like that.

Kato: I think that's great advice. Also, what I found when I was talking to people that I admired was that I felt myself, again this is imposter syndrome kicking in a little bit, feeling worried about taking up too much of their time or saying something stupid or them thinking that I was not smart enough. Then I lost a little bit of my authenticity in trying to say the right thing and the smart thing. And then obviously you end up saying very stupid things.

But I mean, just try to get past that and be who you normally are, as if you would explain something to your mom at the kitchen table, just in the way that you normally talk to people. That's going to come across much more genuine and authentic, which is an important thing when you're looking for a good match with a mentor: authenticity, who you are, what your spark is. Some people may not like it, but others will, and that's fine, as long as it's coming from you.

Jonathan: I think having realistic expectations for relationship-building is good too. You're right. I've had to come to grips with this as a people pleaser—maybe a reforming people pleaser. I want everybody to like me. I want to develop a good rapport with everyone I meet. And that happens with a lot of people I meet, I would say the vast majority. But sometimes you just don't click with people.

So I think rather than take it personally, you put a pin in it, move on to the next opportunity, and keep looking. There are a lot of opportunities.

I think you mentioned this earlier, that you found mentors outside of the legal profession and that you're looking for mentors all the time who are able to build you up in different ways. Is there anyone in particular who did something special for you along the way, whether in your legal career or outside?

Kato: Well, I think the ones I think back to when I was younger for sure were teachers. When you're in high school or even younger, you don't necessarily like all teachers, but then there are a few passing by that you seem to have some kind of connection with and that make you think, "Oh, I really enjoy the way they present something." Somehow you get more interested in that class and you ask more questions, which then builds some kind of connection.

I think those were my first kinds of mentors that I really looked up to. And they're not practicing lawyers. They're teachers in high school. I recently had the opportunity of going

back to my former high school because it was a reunion. I won't say how many years since we graduated.

Jonathan: Ten. Only your ten-year reunion, we know.

Kato: Yeah, yeah, something like that. They do this every five years and gather everyone—those who graduated five years ago, ten years ago, fifteen years ago. I actually thought it was a much lower number and almost signed up incorrectly. But okay, that's the funny side of the story.

When I went there, it was actually quite nice to see these people again because some of them have really shaped my life. That sounds dramatic or emotional, but it really is true. When you're a teenager and you're learning about the world, there's so much going on.

For instance, my parents went through a divorce, and I really struggled with that. One of the teachers had noticed, and I had some conversations with her. Those conversations meant the world to me because she could give me an adult perspective on things without being involved. Otherwise I was just talking to family members—my parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles—which didn't really help. She gave me that adult perspective without having any skin in the game. She could just really be there for me and how I felt.

I saw her again during that night, and it was really great to see her. So yeah, that's a great example of someone who can mentor you in how to manage your own emotions and how to deal with certain things you're struggling with outside your legal career.

Jonathan: I had a great mentor who was the managing partner of the last firm I was at. He helped me recognize some of my talents. Along the same lines of what teachers do for you, if you're listening, and if you're humble enough to take the advice and really understand that they have your best interests at heart, it's good to ask people to help you identify where your talents are.

A lot of times we think we're good at something, or maybe we can recognize we're good at some things. Others can see that we have great potential to build those foundational skills into another expertise. This happened with a partner named Dan Harris. Dan was in the habit of doing a lot of public speaking. He blogged a lot. He recognized pretty early on in discussions with me that I could do similar things, but I had never really held myself out in blogging or public speaking and presenting in a legal context.

I was nervous, and I was an experienced lawyer. I was seven years into my career and still very nervous about the idea of going from kind of being behind the veil and being able to take client questions and answer them in a safe space, versus putting yourself out there either in real time, in an in-person presentation, or putting your best thoughts out there on

paper or in the electronic space and seeing what other people thought about it. Seeing whether it was helpful to them, or whether I was completely wrong—but also not being afraid of being completely wrong, because a lot of times we're all just trying to read the tea leaves.

So I give Dan a lot of credit for helping me get past that time. He said, "You know what, Jonathan, at this firm this is what we do. We expect everyone to blog. We expect you to speak. Also, you're very good at this. You need to keep doing it." I had never really thought that I could. I don't even think I was being humble. I think I was just, again, super ignorant as to what my basic skill set was.

I attribute it to this concept that my brain is very small and I can only understand things in small pieces. It turns out that you can understand very complex legal issues and things going on in the world. You just need to break them down into small enough pieces that you can digest them. What I initially thought was an extreme fault of mine has turned into a bit of a strength because it helps my clients that I don't jump from A to Z. I walk them through B, C, D, all the way there, because that's how my brain works.

So my mentor Dan helped me understand that what I initially thought was a flaw was really not that much of a flaw, or was something very common to a lot of us. We're not all geniuses.

Kato: No, I think it's actually a great asset because that's precisely what clients want. They probably aren't necessarily active in legal language or anything like that. They come to you with a legal problem, but they need it explained in a very hands-on, understandable way.

I think we're very similar. I have the same thing. When I was studying, I always thought maybe I'm not smart enough because I don't see the bigger picture yet. Breaking things down in small steps helps a lot. Then obviously after a while, we do end up having the capacity to bring it all together. But for me too, the learning process needs to go in small steps. I think many more people are wired like that than the rare geniuses who see the bigger picture at first glance. So I think that's actually an asset.

One thing I'm curious about, Jonathan, is whether based on the experience you have with mentors, you could say what kind of mentor style or mentoring style works best for you. Is it the sugarcoating kind, sweet approach? Or is it the tough-love version, saying what's wrong and how you need to change it, what you need to do differently next time? What works best? I'm asking because I haven't figured it out for myself. I think I tend to get really insecure if someone's too direct, but after a while I don't want to be sugarcoated. I just want it plain as it is.

Jonathan: It took me a long time to figure this out for myself. It helped that I took a personality test, and that helped me understand how my brain was wired. So here's the key to giving me pointed feedback: we have to start and end with this concept that our relationship is never in jeopardy.

That's step one. I try to do this with my mentees. I say, "Look, I'm invested in your success. That's why I'm here. I really want you to succeed. I hope you feel that from me." Now I'm going to proceed to give you some very pointed feedback because that's how my brain wants to deliver it. I need to tell you exactly where I think you need to improve or what you've done well. I try to intersperse things they're doing well and not just things that can be improved.

Then I have to end with the same thing: "Now remember, our relationship is not in jeopardy. Your job is not in jeopardy. This is all part of the learning curve. I really just want you to continue to improve. So I hope that you can take this and move forward with it."

That was the key for me. I'm very direct, but at the same time I value relationships a lot. I need to know at the beginning and end of the day—and when I was a young lawyer, I needed to know—that my job wasn't in jeopardy. Remember, I started my first job with three kids, including a young baby, and I was stressed to the max. It was a horribly stressful time. We got sick because we were in a new state, and our oldest was in school bringing all kinds of sicknesses home. I think we were sick for at least two months straight in the winter. So I was very stressed.

I didn't know how to ask for that reassurance that everyone makes mistakes, that my job is not in jeopardy, that we were hired because they believed in me and knew I could improve. So please know this is not a job-killing discussion. All we're doing here is working on pointers on what will improve your skill set.

Once I get past that initial idea and I'm not stressed about my job being in jeopardy, then fine, give me all the hard feedback and I will work at my pace to learn it as fast as I can. But I do need to know at the end of the day, again, that our relationship is what matters the most. I don't know if that resonates with you and how your brain works, but I'm curious either now or later, when you finally figure it out, and can share with us.

Kato: Well, I do like the approach of verbalizing that the relationship is not in jeopardy. I'm going to use that with my kids: "Our relationship is not in jeopardy, but I need you to clean up your own stuff."

Yeah, no, I think that's good advice. And I think both can work at the same time. It's all about honesty, right? Of course, you have to look at how you phrase things, but it needs to be honest and not so sugarcoated that the message actually erodes.

When I'm giving feedback to people I work with, I always try to find a little bit of a personalized style for each one of them because some are very insecure and tend to take feedback very personally, and then will have a sleepless night over it. So there, obviously, I'm going to be more careful. Some others probably need to hear it a bit more explicitly for it to actually sink in. That is what I really try to do when I'm mentoring, if you will—thinking what is the best possible shot at making sure the message is heard and there is actual result from the feedback.

Sometimes I have to stop myself in my tracks. For instance, when I receive a draft and it comes with some flaws, and these flaws keep reoccurring, the first impulse might be to just draft an email saying, "This is the fifth draft," and then I'm like, "Oh, stop. Stop. This is not going to give the desired result." The person on the other end will just think, "Oh, this is just venting frustration."

Who am I serving with this action? Is it just me venting frustration? Because if that's the case, then I just need to tell a friend or go for a run and get it out of my system, and then actually get to the point of the feedback that is going to help the other person.

Jonathan: That's great. Well, we're at time now. Of course, we always have more to talk about than we have time for, but we want to be respectful of our listeners. I am very much looking forward to our next conversation, Kato.

Kato: Very likewise.