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## Context to the conversation

Katy speaks about one of the attributes of Dr Max Bazerman, her advisor (who has a track record of having several of his students in reputed colleges around the world) when she was a PhD student. She speaks about how he would behave when his students would often face a bump or deal with a rejection and come to him for advise. Katy says that rather than focusing on critiquing the work content, he would focus on encouraging the student, highly counterintuitive for a lot of us.

## Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Katy, the other piece I found fascinating in the book is you referred to Max Bazerman, your dissertation advisor and you actually talk about the nuance with which he dealt with the students and you actually link it to another piece of research from Kellogg. Could you talk a little bit about the nuance here about how we should focus on building confidence rather than pointing out mistakes people make?

Katy Milkman (KM): Yeah, absolutely. Um, I love that you gave me the chance to talk about this. I had the great good fortune to be advised by Max Bazerman as a PhD student. He is an amazing Professor at Harvard Business School and he is a, sort of, unusually talented advisor. His students have done unusually well in their careers. And I always wondered what that formula was, like, what was his secret, how did he take so many students and generate so much success. So I was really interested in, actually when I started advising my own students as a faculty member at Wharton, what was it that Max did to succeed, that was different that so many other advisors. And what I think I learned from both talking to Max and exploring my own experience and actually reading research is something that I do not think Max appreciated, he did perhaps. So I tell a story of a time when I walked into Max's office after getting a rejection from a journal, which is like the worst thing that can happen to an academic, especially a junior one who is trying to figure out how to publish, it is publish or perish. And this work I had done, I had put my soul into for two years, it came back with reviews from all these people who are experts in my field saying, rejected, it is not worth publishing and I thought the end is near. And Max just gave me, with total confidence, the advice that it was good work, it was going to turn out well, it was going to get into another journal, go revise it for a couple of days, do what I could, and let us send it back out again, and not panic, basically, which of course is great advice. We all appreciate you are not to panic but what I realized is there is something really systematic about the way he handled anxiety, the way he coached his students to succeed, that was really actually different than other advisors. He had this total faith that his students would succeed. He really believed in us in a way that was different than most advisors. And maybe most advisors do believe in their students, but we do not always convey consistently like you are doing great, here is how you are succeeding, here is what you are doing right. And Max had an uncanny ability to do this. It all became clear to me years later when I learned about the research of

Lauren Eskreis-Winkler who is now a Professor at the Kellogg School as you alluded to. She had this insight doing her PhD research that more often than not when someone comes to us and they are struggling, our instinct is to give them advice. And of course, an advisor is the person who most often is asked to give advice. So it is sort of funny that I am pairing this with Max. What Lauren wondered is if we maybe have the formula wrong and if instead of always giving advice when people come to us and tell us about their struggles and are not soliciting advice, maybe we should actually do something different to build their confidence, maybe we should turn the script around and we should ask them for advice, put them in the role of mentor and coach and see if that could help them. And she thought it might be effective to turn people who are trying to achieve more into advice givers for a few reasons. One is she thought it would build their confidence and that is the most important reason. Most of the time they are used to being told they do not know what they are talking about, this is why you are failing, let me give you my tips and that just depresses confidence but if we put them on a pedestal and say, I actually think you probably have some insights from struggling with this challenge, maybe you could share them with others who are facing similar challenges and help them, we would say, hey, we believe in you, that you are smart, that you can figure this out, that you already have some things to share and can help other people. So that is going to build their confidence, which often is deflated at this point in a challenge to change. Then a second thing that it might do is help them dredge up insights. So they might not have even bothered to go looking for if they did not have to give advice to someone else. And finally, once they say, oh you should do this, they are going to start believing it. There is something called the saying is believing effect. If you say something to someone else, you do not want to be hypocritical and you start to sort of think that must be true or else why would I have said it, and you do not want to deviate from your own advice. So I link this to Max again because one of the things I realized he did with all of his students is, he put us in the position of advice giver to his more junior students. So there was sort of a group of us and not only did he try to coach us when we asked for solicited advice, he actually very rarely gave unsolicited advice. And often, his first step is to put you in the role of mentoring someone else, so whether it was an undergraduate or a more junior student on a project, so there is a coach opportunity for you as a doctoral student to learn how to be a leader and how to give other people advice. So I think he implemented this in practice and then Lauren's research has proven, in a number of different situations, just how beneficial it is to be put in the role of advice giver. And one study that I got to collaborate on, we randomly assigned high school students to either give advice on studying and how to study more effectively to their younger peers or just to a control condition where they go by life as usual. And what we found is that being randomly assigned to just spend about 10 minutes writing out bits of advice for other students, here are good places to study, here is how you can avoid the temptations to check your phone constantly and stay focused. Writing out that advice at the beginning of the third quarter of the academic year significantly improved students' grades in the class they most hoped to improve in, as well as in math over and above a control group that just did not do this 10-minute exercise. And we were not turning to see students into valedictorians, it was a small boost in grades, but it was significant and that is a testament to how powerful this tool can be of turning people into an advice giver, rather than constantly just putting arm around them and trying to coach them, once we understand that it builds confidence.

DJ: Got it. And it is so counterintuitive. Typically, when people mess up and come to you for advice, it is very easy or tempting to jump into the position of problem solving and ideas giving but I found this insight powerful and counterintuitive at the same time.

KM: Yeah. No, I really love this insight and I do want to point out it does not say we should not give solicited advice. When I walked into my advisor Max, the great Max Bazerman's office, I solicited advice what do I do about this manuscript. And he was helpful to say we are going to resubmit it. But

it is pointing out that sometimes when you give unsolicited advice, it can harm confidence. And just in general when we are coaching and helping people how important it is to keep confidence in mind and how we are through our actions, whether we realize it or not, and every bit of coaching we give them, everything we say to them, it can implicitly convey whether we believe they have got what it takes or not, and it is so important to build people's confidence in order to help them achieve more.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I want to link this back to the insight from James Clear (JC) who was at the podcast a while back. He speaks about how our identity plays a role in the way we build new habits or respond to change.

JC: *“every action you take is like a vote for the type of person you want to become. So in a sense your habits are how you embody a particular identity like every time that you make your bed you embody the identity of someone who is clean and organized, every time that you make a healthy meal and cook that at home rather than eating out you embody the identity of someone who is focused on eating healthy. Every time that you write one sentence you embody the identity of a writer and know those little actions, those tiny habits do not radically transform your body overnight, they don't lead to a written book in a single day but they do cast a vote for being that kind of person. So early on that's really powerful because those habits provide evidence of this new identity that give you a reason to root that belief in something. So it can be a very powerful thing to adopt to a new identity, could be very powerful to look at yourself in this new light and habits and think of the best path to doing that but use down the line when it's time for another change or another upgrade you also have to be willing to repeat the cycle again and continue to grow and evolve.”*

DJ: A similar insight came up in my conversation with Alan Eagle about Bill Campbell, the Trillion Dollar Coach who often acted as a cheerleader for the leaders in Google!

If I reflect on my personal experience, I had something very similar happen to me when I was at IIMA. I used to like courses in Operations Management and one of the Professors in that Department was Prof Kannan Sethuraman. He had done his PhD in Wharton and was teaching at IIMA. He was like a breath of fresh air in the way he approached the class. He would treat us like adults and there was a healthy climate of discussion in the class room while with a lot of other professors, there would often be a climate of fear.

I was doing quite well in that elective course but for one of the projects, I remember I didn't have a lot of time to put in a good quality work because of competing deadlines. I ended up doing some cut paste and submitting a shoddy job. I got an email from him summoning me to his office. I was sure that I would get the dressing down of my life. But when I went there, he looked at me in the eye and said “Deepak, I think you are capable of better work. This is not you. I am extended the deadline for the whole class by a week and I want you to send in work that would make you proud”. That is it. Nothing more, nothing less and when I look back, that made all the difference. I remember, I did well in the course eventually.

Coming back to Katy Milkman's insight, sometimes when people come to us for help, it is important for us to reinforce their positive identity rather than further batter them with more critique. Very often, they are smart enough to figure the answer out themselves if they believe in themselves.

## End of nugget transcription

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Nugget from James Clear that is referenced: [Keeping the identity small](#).

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## Katy Milkman - Nuggets

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### **About Deepak Jayaraman**

Deepak seeks to unlock the human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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