



Transcript for the WLEI Podcast:

Embracing Regret for Better Living: A WLEI Podcast with author Dan Pink

DATE TK, 2022

*Regret, the pervasive and often toxic emotional mess most of us invariably experience, need not be so painful, says best-selling author Dan Pink. In fact, his new book *The Power of Regret* counsels readers to deliberately view regret as a process that can be examined in a way to help us all lead better lives. This WLEI podcast with host Tom Ehrenfeld explores how Pink came to this conclusion and explores parallels between his approach to processing regret and Lean's mindful approach to framing problems for continuous improvement.*

Tom Ehrenfeld:

Welcome to WLEI, the LEI podcast. I'm Tom Ehrenfeld, your host. And today we are privileged to have with us Dan Pink, who has a new book called *The Power of Regret: How Looking Backward Moves Us Forward*. Welcome Dan.

Dan Pink:

Thank you, Tom. Thanks for having me.

Tom:

So you have previously written bestselling books, such as *When: The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing*, *To Sell Is Human*, *Drive*, and *A Whole New Mind*. And as I think I mentioned to you, in your book there's a very ambitious effort to help people become more aware of how they are thinking about thinking. That is, you offer insights into ways to understand the process better and perhaps convert it to a more productive process.

You say don't think of regret, for example, as a thing, but as a process. And that's partly why I reached out to you from LEI, because I think there's areas of overlap between this Lean approach and between the ways you tee up, how people process regret. But please, why don't we start? Can you give me a quick precis? Tell me what your basic argument is in *The Power of Regret*.

Dan:

So this is a book that looks at this very misunderstood emotion of regret, which is an emotion that makes us feel bad. When we look backward in which we had done things differently or

done things a different way. And what I'm arguing here based on about 50 years of science is that we've gotten this emotion wrong. We think that regret makes us weak when it can, done right, make us strong.

We think that regret is an alternative when in fact it's ubiquitous. So what 50 years of science tells us is that everybody has regrets. Everybody has. Everybody has regrets, which is one of the most common emotions that human beings have. And if we treat it right, it's actually a transformative emotion, it can help us become better strategists. It can help us become better decision makers. It can help us become better negotiators. It can help us become better parents.

And so I'm trying to reclaim regret from the grip of people who don't fully understand it and who have fallen prey to this incredibly empty headed, positive all the time, never have any regret philosophy of life, which is not an effective blueprint for living.

Tom:

I almost feel like you bury the lead because, you're not directly saying... One argument you make is that no regrets is not a useful credo or approach to life, but rather think about how you experience and process regret after it's happened.

So it feels like the primary driver is to develop a mindfulness about how you process these events, because regret invariably occurs when there's a gap between something that happened in the past, whether it's action or inaction on your part and what you wanted, to happen. So I guess that's an open-ended question, there's parallels to Lean here and I'll get to that, but....

Dan:

Oh, yeah.

Well, I'm not sure. It's interesting you call it mindfulness. Because, I don't think that word ever appears in the book. Mindfulness comes with a certain amount of freight Tom, as you know. And so my view of it is sort of to your, to somewhat earlier point, which is this is that, with negative emotions in general and this negative emotion in particular, we often have these two polar ways of dealing with it.

One is to ignore it, say, nope, never look backward. Nope. I don't think about regret. Nope. Move on. Look forward. Okay. You can ignore regrets. I think that's a bad idea. I think you're losing capacity. I think you're losing capability. I know you're losing capability and capacity on that.

The other side though, is in some ways even worse, which is to be brought down entirely by regret to be captured by it, to wallow in it. That's a bad idea too. So I don't want people to ignore regret and I don't want people to wallow in regret. I want people to think about it.

It's about thinking, to me. And thinking and mindfulness are siblings or first cousins, but I want people to think about it. Use your regrets as signals, as information as data. And when you do that, the evidence is overwhelming that it can help us on in a whole array of things. The problem is that no one ever teaches us how to do that.

Tom:

Okay. How do people do that? How do they use regret as a system?

Dan:

Yeah. Well, so again, when we process our regrets properly, it helps our decision making skills. It helps our problem solving skills. It helps our meaning finding skills. So now, how do we go about dealing with our retrospective regrets in a productive way? I like to look at it as three parts, inward, outward, forward. Inward, outward, forward, inward.

You have to reframe how you think about the regret and yourself. A lot of times when we talk to ourselves in the face of missteps and screw ups, we're brutal, we're cruel, we're vicious. Our self-talk is absurd. So don't do that. Instead, treat yourself with what's called self-compassion. Self-compassion, which is the work of Kristin Neff, tells us that we should treat ourselves with kindness rather than contempt. Think about our screw ups as part of the human condition, as moments in our life, rather than the full definition of our life.

So that's outward. There's a strong argument to be made for disclosure, disclosing our regrets. One of the things that I found in my research is how willing people were to talk about their regrets. Because when we disclose our regrets, it's an unburdening. What's more, when we talk about our regrets, when we right about our regrets, we convert this blobby negative abstraction into concrete words, which are less fearsome and begins a sense making process.

So that's outward. And then forward, this is really important. And I actually think it connects to sort of the aspect of Lean that is continuous improvement, which is how do you... You got to draw a lesson from it. That is simply, treating yourself with kindness rather than contempt is great. Disclosing it to make sense of it is great, but you got to then move to the final thing and draw a lesson from it.

And we tend to be pretty bad at solving our own problems and decent at solving other people's problems. So you want to do a little self-distancing. So talk to yourself in the third person, use Andy Gross famous technique of, if I was replaced today, what would my successor do? Even things like some kind of the sort of time travel that underlies regret, think about what the you of 2032 is going to care about.

And so that approach, it's about thinking, all right? It's about thinking it's not about ignoring our regrets. It's not about feeling our regrets. It's about, thinking about what they tell us kindness rather than contempt, disclose to make sense, draw a lesson from it. And when we do that, it becomes more habitual. And when we start doing that, we actually start improving our performance. And the very little secret is that we reduce our subsequent regrets.

Tom:

So here's where I want to introduce some aspects of Lean thinking. And Kaizen, I think one of the powerful takeaways for me of Lean is that it frames problems as gaps, no more, no less. It's a gap between current state where you are, and intended state.

So it takes a very pragmatic approach and has all these formal methods and tools for examining that gap and breaking it down and getting to root cause of what's causing the defects or the

reasons you're not achieving it and becomes a resolution of those causes so that you make your current state closer to your future state. And it's continuous improvement because as you get there, you slip up and you continue to have this tension. So it's like regret, but in a more pragmatic approach without any kind of flagellation.

And it even draws from Deming: it says the problem is not the people, it's the system. It says the system is what's causing the gaps. And so you have to examine what is producing them. And I think that's one reason why I'm saying, well, how does it work as a mechanism for reducing regret moving forward? And there's a question at the end of this...if only to be like Chris Farley and so well, do you remember, it's like, what do you make of that take?

Dan:

Well, there are like four different questions, they're bundled in there. So let me try to unbundle and address each one. I think your point about the gap is really quite fascinating because you talk about with Lean the gap being, the gap between the current state and the intended state.

I think that's analogous to regret. In a way, what regret is, is it's a comparison of the current state and the potential state in a way. What could have been. So that's kind of interesting and I guess it's like, what do you do with that gap? And the thing is that the whole proposition of Lean and Kaizen is using that gap as an opportunity for learning.

And I think that's the problem we have with regret. We don't look at it that way. So as you know, from reading the book, I got these people in my book who believe in this credo of no regret so ferociously, that they get tattoos with it. And so, which is disturbing in a way, because no one would have a ta...

What you're saying, if tattoo that says, no regrets is you... No one would get a tattoo that says no learning, no growth, no improvement. And in a sense, that's essentially what they're doing. So I think that the gap is a really quite fascinating point. Now you make another interesting point on the system, which is that... And this goes to how we think about certain kinds of regrets.

And let me tell you about. As you know from the book, I collected regrets from a huge number of people all over the world. We're now over 20,000 regrets from people in 109 countries. And one of the most common regrets that people had, was what I like to call a foundation regret.

And a foundation regret sounds like this. If only I'd done the work. These are people who regret spending too much and saving too little, big regret. People who regret not taking care of their health, people who regret not working hard enough in school. Now, that's a tricky one because some of these regret regrets that people have are the whole notion of regret. The whole point of regret is that regret requires some agency. You can't regret something that you don't have agency over. That's why regret is different from disappointment.

And so there's an interesting kind of metaphysical question about how much agency do we have in different realms of our life. And so back to these foundation regrets, if I hear from somebody who says I'm 38 years old, and I've never been able to save a dime, I need to know more before I can fully acknowledge that, that is a regret. If I learn that this person has been working for 15 years at a very highly paid job and has no other obligations, I'm like, yeah, okay, you should regret that because that's on you.

But if I hear that this person is the first in her family to go to college, she graduated with \$250,000 of student loans. She's supporting her family on this salary and I'd say, you know what? That's a system issue. But I think that's one of the things that I like about this emotion of regret, is that it's very clarifying. It clarifies, it helps us examine those fundamental issues, which is how much is the individual and how much is the context.

And that is, I think the central question of human behavior, not to mention human behavior and organization.

Tom:

And I think it gets to this issue that I was maybe trying to say, which is, everything comes down to how you reckon with this gap, in the present, or even moving forward between what you have and what you might have had, and what questions you ask. And you can choose to beat yourself up. You can choose to ignore it, whitewash it.

Or you can take a more structured, methodical approach to examining why do I have this gap? Why do I have this thing that doesn't align with my goals and my values and how can I resolve that and make it better? And to be honest, this is one of the things that I find very exciting about Lean, is that when done properly, it endows agency, among people who are doing the work with a way of understanding...

Dan:

Okay. Yeah.

Tom:

That's why there's such an emphasis on standard work at Toyota and elsewhere. Because, standard work represents the best known way of getting something done. And some people think that it's controlling and limiting, but done right, it really represents the best known way. And it is always subject to improvement when a new way is discovered.

And it triggers an opportunity for learning when the standard work doesn't work, there's got to be a reason why. So it's because it's insufficient or there's improvements that can be made. And so I guess my point is that it just feels to me like a key part of this... Let's call it mindful or way of approaching problems when they have occurred is to have some sort of way to make sense of them, that helps you explore ways to make it better in a non-judgmental non-blaming way.

Dan:

Yeah.

Tom:

I think the book is great. I think that, one of the things is it offers ways for people to reckon with some of the toxic emotions that come with regret. It gives people permission to say, yeah, I've had these foundational regrets or so forth, but it gives permission to move forward, from where they are in the present. I think.

Dan:

Yeah. I generally agree. I think it's a very interesting point. There is a degree of permission that people have to have, and this is something I've noticed since the book has come out and since I've started talking about this stuff. Is that this is a topic that people really, really, really, really want to talk about.

This is a topic that the veil of silence is a very thin veil. It's easily pierced. And I noticed this right away when I... In fact, one of the things that got me out this topic was that, when I noticed when I first became intrigued by this idea before I was even contemplating writing a book about it, I found that when I mentioned regret to people, they leaned in ways that they didn't for other kinds of topics. That is simply saying the R word out loud and sharing one of my own regrets, seemed to open the floodgates of people who wanted to share their own regrets and make sense of it.

I think that, that degree of permission is actually really important. And once we have permission, we can begin some of the sense making process. And I think when you have permission, you actually destigmatize it and you avoid that blame.

If you look at it as a signal, as information, as data, as I said before, then it can be incredibly productive. I do think that we have to give people the beyond permission, we have to give people the tools to allow them to treat themselves with the same degree of kindness they would treat somebody else. Because, I don't think we always do that for ourselves.

Tom:

Absolutely. That's one of the suggestions, self-care, self-compassion, I believe. What's interesting is reconciling this book with some of the other ones you've written, because you've been more... I don't want to give sloppy labels. Your previous books have been proactively aspirational, helping people understand how to sell, how to capture the whole mind, think about what motivates us.

And to me they're about moving forward in better ways. And I know that's part of the regret promise, but my experience of reading it is that it's largely focused with processing activities that have happened in the past. So how important is the processing of the past in being able to move forward in a way that you really want to achieve, that you aspire to?

Dan:

I think it's essential. The subtitle of the book is how looking backward moves us forward. I don't consider sort of retrospective thinking and prospective thinking at odds with each other. I think that they're actually tightly integrated because when we look back, we say, okay, what did I do? What did I do wrong? If we have the things that we did wrong, we don't beat ourselves up over it. We extract lessons from it and that powers us to move forward.

Tom:

Right. No, and there's this kind of power of humility in terms of positioning one to act in a more aligned way to do it more purposefully. And...

Dan:

Yeah. Here's the thing, coming back again, it's actually even simpler than that. I don't even know if it requires so much humility as it requires, just simply thinking. So that we've been sort of sold a bill of goods that we should never look backward, but that we should always look forward. And that's ridiculous.

Looking backward thinking about what we've done, excavating our successes and failures is incredibly instructive. And so we should look backward, but we should look backward with a keen, sharp sense. We shouldn't say no, I never look backward. It's ridiculous. I think that's unhealthy.

And I think that it goes against the whole purpose of this emotion at the same time because we haven't been taught very well, how to deal with negative emotions. A lot of times people get debilitated by it, by any kind of negative emotion, including this negative emotion of regret. That's bad too.

What we be should be doing is we should be thinking about these things. There's a puzzle here. Regret makes us feel bad. Regret does not feel good. This is the problem that people have with it. It doesn't feel good. It causes us to be uncomfortable, but we have a pile of evidence showing that regret clarifies what we care about and instructs us to do better. Right? It's powerful and transformative. It clarifies what we care about and it instructs us to do better.

Here's the thing though. People want the clarification and they want the instruction. They don't want the discomfort. And I'm sorry, it doesn't work that way. You got to have both. And so if we actually are more thoughtful about the discomfort and say, wait a second, I'm experiencing discomfort. What is this telling me? What is this signal revealing? Then it can be useful.

But I think what happens too often is that we feel uncomfortable and we immediately want to try to switch it off because we don't like discomfort or we're so unaccustomed to dealing with discomfort that it becomes overwhelming. And what I want is people to think about it.

Tom:

Right. And I think what I'm getting at, is I'm trying to try to bludgeon in this into a Lean framework. One of the dynamic things I love about Lean is that it has these very prescribed methods for realizing ideal states.

You never get there, but it's these system wide habits of thinking. And I've resisted when people say it's a different way of thinking. And I've started to accept that. Do you believe there are more methods available for readers of the book to adopt in the present that are regret minimizing framework as they move forward.

Dan:

Absolutely. There's no question about it because here's the thing, So I hinted at this, but I've collected 20,000 regrets now from people in 109 countries. Around the world, people regret the same four things. I talked about these foundation regrets where people regret not doing the work, there are also regrets about boldness. If only I've taken the chance, these are people

who regret not traveling, not speaking up, not asking people out on dates, not starting businesses. There are moral regrets.

If only I have done the right thing, people regret bullying, they regret marital infidelity, those sorts of things. And then they're also connection regrets. If only I reached out and these are regrets about the full spectrum of relationships in our lives, especially when those relationships come apart. And over and over again, that's what people regret.

And so when we make our decisions now, prospectively, when we're trying to figure out what to do next, it's pretty clear that... I think I can make a pretty safe bet at an individual level. What you and I, and most of our fellow human beings are going to care about in 10 years. You and I are not going to care about whether we bought a blue car or a gray car in 10 years. We're just not.

You and I are not going to care about what we had for dinner tonight in 10 years. What we are going to care about are these four things. Did we do the work to build a stable foundation for ourselves and the people we care about? Did we take sensible risk? Did we act? Did we do stuff in our limited time here on this planet? Did we do the right thing? And did we connect with, to people we love period.

And that's it. And so, this is part of the clarification that regret offers us, that if you understand what people regret the most, we understand what they value the most and most of us are fairly similar. Most of us value roughly the same things and knowing what we're going to regret allows us to minimize those regrets in the future.

Tom:

And how does this process expand within groups? So if we try to conceive of this within the context of a workplace with teams trying to achieve stuff, are there operational analogies to it? And again, my thinking is informed by Lean practice, which places a lot of emphasis on articulating goals and establishing benchmarks and KPIs, and trying to understand why expected KPIs aren't happening doing root cause analysis.

Dan:

I intentionally wrote this book with the unit of one as the analysis. And so I didn't write a lot about organizations. So I'm loath to say, oh, these certain organizational steps that people can carry out in order to minimize their future organizational regrets. That said, I do think that if we know what people regret the most. We know what they value the most.

It seems around the world, people value these four things most. The constituent elements of a good life are, fairness, boldness, morality, and connection. And if that's the case, if those are the elements of a good life, then why would they not be the elements of the part of our life that we're spending at work?

And so I do think that you can make a strong argument that these are the core components of a coherent effective corporate culture. A corporate culture in which people can do their best work and be their best selves. And at some level can do their best work because they can be their best selves. Now, when you get to the granular issue of goal setting and KPIs, I don't have much to say about that in this context.

Tom:

Right. And I think the missing link is, again, this kind of, not just permission to have gaps, but leaning into the gaps and creating them consciously as a means of being driven forward. And I hate the debate about the value of failure, because I find that people always say, oh yeah, fail often.

And it's like, no, it's not about failing per se. It's about having a mindset where you're willing to learn from it. And you don't have to fail to do that. You have to be willing to take risks and willing to have the risks not pay off.

But to me, the kind of amplification of this mindset from one to many has to do with creating mechanisms to build awareness and of how you're achieving the goals that you've set out to achieve, and what are the kind of barriers that prevent them and finding ways to resolve those barriers at the root, which to me is about organizational learning.

Dan:

I think that you have the same kind of organizational root cause finding when you excavate one's regrets. So one of the ideas in the book that I like is the failure resume, where you list all your failures, your screw ups, your mistakes in one column, then the next column you list what lesson you learned, and then the third column you list what you're going to do about it. And having done this myself in the second column, the lesson that I learned in some cases with some of my mistakes, there wasn't a lesson.

Tom:

Okay. Yeah.

Dan:

That is based on the information I had at that moment, it was actually a pretty sound decision. The outcome wasn't great, but there's a big difference between having a bad outcome and making a bad decision. And so, that kind of going to the root cause, going to the decision itself can be extremely useful.

And this exercise of the failure resume is in some ways, freeing for people because they realize it goes back to what we were talking about earlier, Tom, it starts getting us to figure out what do we have agency over? What is circumstance and context?

Tom:

Right. And it becomes part of this habitual process, which as you probably know the word having lived in Japan, hansei, reflection as a...

Dan:

Yeah. We're circling around the same kind of concepts. Hansei, mindfulness, thinking, that's essentially what it is and it's not. And I think it actually goes to almost the interplay between emotion and cognition, that to me, we have this question, I write about this. It's like, what are feelings? Especially negative feelings for?

And so there's this view out there that negative feelings are for ignoring that they're not real, that we should always be positive. Norman Vincent Peale, the father of positive thinking said that we should banish the very word regret from our vocabulary. When in fact regret is part of our cognitive machinery, it's ludicrous, right? So we think that these emotions are for... Especially negative emotions are for ignoring.

And feelings are for feelings. That feelings are itself, a form of truth. That feelings are the only received wisdom and that's nonsense too. I think that feeling is for thinking. That when we experience the spear of negative emotions, we have to look at them, as they've said many times now.

They have to look at them as signals, as information, as data as the world trying to tell us something, and we shouldn't get brought on by that. Once we begin to develop these habits anymore, then if I look at the temperature outside in Washington, DC, and I check my phone and say, oh, what's the temperature outside today in Washington DC. And the temperature turns out, it's a very cold day here in the nation's capital. It is. I can tell you, it is.

It's a very cold day here in the nation's capitol. It is four degrees Celsius here in the nation's capital. And I can say, oh my God, that's the worst thing in the world. I can be completely brought down by that, or I can say, oh, it doesn't matter that it's cold outside. I'm going to go out without a jacket anyway. We can say, oh, it's four degrees. All right. Let me think about what it means that it's four degrees Celsius outside in Washington, DC today.

Tom:

Yep. Which is how much fahrenheit?

Dan:

That's about 40.

Tom:

Okay. Thank you for translating. Again, I think I cited it before, but there's the just great Edward's Deming line about don't blame the individual blame the system. And it's a way of mitigating this very, almost toxic aspect of blame and converting it into something more pragmatic.

And I think that's a nice thing about your book is finding a way to be pragmatic about something that happens and having an effective method for reckoning with it and adjusting moving forward. So... Go ahead.

Dan:

Blame is a very interesting word because, with regret, there is some blame, but the blame shouldn't be debilitating. Well, maybe blame is too hard of a word. There is some responsibility. There's certain things where people regretted because they screwed up and it's their mistake and it's on them.

And you have to actually look that in the eye and say, yeah, that was me. That's on me. That's my mistake. But people make mistakes. I'm going to disclose it. I'm going to talk about it and I'm going to learn from it.

Tom:

Right. Okay. I'm happy there, if you want to wrap it up.

Dan:

Whatever is good for you, you know, your listeners better than I.

Tom:

Well, I don't think I missed anything. Let's remind our listeners that we're talking with Mr. Pink. The book is *The Power of Regret: How Looking Backwards Moves Us Forward*. It's a really well done smart, funny book that will help you address this part of your life that is actually useful. And keeping free.

Dan:

So you make a great point. It's about seeing the gaps in your life and not ignoring them and not being brought down by them, but using them as lessons.

Tom:

Okay. All right. Thank you, Dan Pink. Thanks. That's great.

Dan:

Thank you, Tom.