# What Your Employees Won't Tell You with Melina Palmer
# Brainfluence

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Full Episode Transcript

**Brainfluence with Roger Dooley**

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**Intro** [00:00:00]:
Welcome to Brainfluence, where author and international keynote speaker Roger Dooley shares powerful but practical ideas from world class experts and sometimes a few of his own. To learn more about Roger's books, Brainfluence and Friction, and to find links to his latest articles and videos, the best place to start is RogerDooley.com. Roger's keynotes will keep your audience entertained and engaged. At the same time, he will change the way they think about customer and employee experience. To check availability for an in person or virtual keynote or workshop, visit RogerDooley.com.

**Roger Dooley** [00:00:37]:
Welcome to Brainfluence. I'm Roger Dooley. Today's guest is Melina Palmer, an applied behavioral economist who teaches people about behavioral science and how to use it in very practical ways. She's also a podcast host who teaches applied behavioral economics through the Human Behavior Lab at Texas A & M University. For y'all who aren't Texans, that makes her an aggie. Not a longhorn. The book we discussed last time was what your customer wants and can't tell you. I love that. Her new book shifts the focus away from the customer and toward the employee. It's titled, appropriately enough, what your Employees Need and Can't Tell you. Welcome to the show, Melina.

**Melina Palmer** [00:01:15]:
Yeah, thanks so much for having me. Excited to be back.

**Roger Dooley** [00:01:18]:
Melina, your new book focuses on change. One of these statistics that everybody quotes all the time, I think I'm probably guilty of doing that myself, is that 70% of change initiatives fail. You start off the book by talking about that statistic. What's your degree of confidence in that?

**Melina Palmer** [00:01:36]:
Well, in my research on that statistic, because just like you, I've heard people use that stat for decades. It feels like right all the time. People have used it. And from what I found, there's no validation in that, that it's not really a real statistic. And so we can, I think, take some confidence in that to say they don't have to be hard changes at work and those change initiatives don't have to fail 70% of the time, especially if we are more thoughtful about putting them together in the right way. That works with the brain.

**Roger Dooley** [00:02:13]:
Yeah, I mean, how could you even measure that? Because a change process could be anything from tearing out your entire order processing and CRM software in a Fortune 50 company to rearranging the desks in an office.

**Melina Palmer** [00:02:29]:
What defines failure? Did you even define what success would have looked like on the front? These all these aspects of it. And, yeah, change is very vast and much more than what people typically think at work, which, of course, is another big point from the Know.

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**Roger Dooley** [00:02:46]:
Melina, I think at the same time, change can be Know, one of the best selling business books of all time. Not one that I particularly recommend, but there's a lot of social proof out there for it is Who Moved My Cheese? Which is all about the difficulty of change and how people tend to react to change in their environment, which is usually not in a good way. So do you think that there is indeed a problem with change in the way companies tend to do it these days?

**Melina Palmer** [00:03:17]:
I do. And the thing is that when people think and talk about change at work, and I think in life too, but at work we really think that the only things that count as a change that's important enough to be considered is something that requires like a project management team, right? Something that is a big change. Like you said, the reorg, your CEOs retiring, a merger, even shifting desks and things around is something where it feels like that's what should matter. But really our brains operate in these micro moments and micro decisions. We all make 35,000 decisions every day on average. And so to instead look at change in those little tiny moments is what's really important if you want to be better about change. And so I make the argument that really every conversation, every initiative at work is one of change. You're either in the wake of change that has already happened, you're in the midst of changes that are currently going on, or you are preparing for change yet to come. And all of that is something that you need to be considerate of as you are putting in subject lines to emails or the way that you have conversations with people. You want to be thoughtful about that to make it so your teams are naturally more receptive to changes when they come.

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**Roger Dooley** [00:04:48]:
I'm not a surfer, Melina, but it sounds sort of like you might say you're either riding the wave or you're underwater. But explain micro decisions.

**Melina Palmer** [00:04:58]:
Yeah, so the brain, like I said, those 35,000 decisions we have, the subconscious or system one doing the bulk of our processing all the time and so little things that we don't think should matter are continually influencing the way that we make a decision. And so I gave the example of an email subject line or something at work and I talk a lot about a particular example of something that happened to me that I think is a good way to show how this can happen at work. So ten years ago I was working at a company. I'd only been there for a couple of months and on a Thursday at 10:00 A.m., I got an email from my boss that said we need to talk. Be in my office at two. And that is a terrifying email to get from your boss. Right. And do we think that I just said, okay, well, 4 hours of work and then I'm going to go see what that's about? No, I stressed and was panicking for 4 hours. I didn't get anything productive done. I spent all that time looking at every project I was working on and every interaction I had had to be ready for what was coming at two. So I get waved in when the time comes, gesture to sit down and the message is, hey, I'm going to be out of the office tomorrow, and I wanted you to know that you're the name I'm putting in my autoresponder in my email, and that was it. Right. And so who knows what else we talked about in that meeting, but everything was really impacted by the word choice in that email. And maybe she saved two minutes of time by not writing a more thoughtful email, but it cost me hours of productive time because of the ripples that happened after the fact. If instead of saying, we

need to talk, be in my office at two, that email had said, I'm going to be out tomorrow, can you meet at 02:00 to discuss it's a totally different scenario. And if she had been ready to tell me something, that was a change that was being asked of me, whether it was something that was objectively good or something bad that was maybe coming down the line. I am by no means prepared to hear it after that first email, but would be okay, potentially ready for it in the other scenario. So those little things, again, that we don't feel like should matter are really important when it comes to working with teams.

**Roger Dooley** [00:07:35]:
Right? I think there's a great takeaway there, Melina, that if you're writing an email to anybody, whether it's an employee or maybe your spouse or significant other, don't start off with we need to talk, and say nothing else. I know that might be the key takeaway of this entire conversation.

**Melina Palmer** [00:07:52]:
Melina yeah, for sure.

**Roger Dooley** [00:07:54]:
But you mentioned System One, and I think probably many of our audience members are familiar with Daniel Kahneman System One and System Two. Plus there are various metaphors. The one that well, actually, throughout the book, not even a metaphor, but you refer to System One as subconscious. I tend to use non conscious. It's really kind of just a matter of shorthand. But also there are metaphors, and you mentioned Jonathan Haidt's metaphor of the rider and the elephant, and you have a particular

one that involves a receptionist. So why don't you briefly explain the two kinds of thinking, melina and also the receptionist executive metaphor.

**Melina Palmer** [00:08:36]:
Yeah, for sure. And like you were saying there, I like to put a couple of different ways of thinking about it for whatever's going to resonate with someone. I don't like to use System One and System Two when I'm talking because I feel like that setup is a system Two process in and of itself. And so people are going, which one was that again? And it's not helpful. Right. Not making the point. So with the receptionist and the executive or this kind of gatekeeper mindset, I like to look at the subconscious brain like that receptionist. When you're trying to get a meeting with a busy executive, not everything's going to make it through. The receptionist is filtering through anything they can do themselves because it's probably a pain. They don't want to have to bug their boss in this case of getting stuff done. And so anything that it already has a rule for and that it can handle can say, know how to do that. Got it. Normal, normal, normal, normal. But when there's something weird that's a little bit off, you don't have a rule for, it will get raised up to that conscious brain to be able to work on and handle. But still the receptionist definitely frames the way that the information is presented to that executive when they're asking questions and things like that. And the subconscious is the same. It's kind of good at pointing out things that it wants that conscious brain to see.

**Roger Dooley** [00:09:58]:
Yeah, I like that. I haven't heard that particular one before and I think it's a good way of thinking about it and definitely anything that is tangible like

that or like the elephant and Roger metaphor. Much easier for people to sort out than system one and system Two when they're just learning the terminology, as you say. Which one was that? Early on in the book, you say that happy, engaged employees are really important for change. And enlarge on that a little bit because really what you're saying is if you want change to happen, it's really got to take place in the right environment. Right? I mean, if you've got disengaged team members, then when you bring change to them and explain what's going to happen, what they need to do to be part of it, which may involve extra work, it may involve changing their personal habits and such, it's going to be a lot more difficult and maybe not.

**Melina Palmer** [00:10:55]:
Even successful when you have disengaged employees. And we've all seen that from time to time. Maybe we've had a job at one time where we were a little bit less engaged than we would like to be. When you're asked about stuff or changes presented to you, you're really rooted in that status quo and the what's in it for me mindset, right? And not looking at the when we look at things like quiet quitting, like no thanks, right, I don't need to deal with like I'm in it for number one and that's me and you're probably trying to force me to do something bad that I don't want to do. And any level of extra work you don't want in the case of engaged employees who have your identity becomes one with the organization you're looking for, what's best for that team. You have bigger circles of empathy you are relating to and tied in with other team members, wanting to support them and help everyone on Team Company to have a really great experience. And one of the things I talk about a lot in the book that I think is just the most important

thing for anyone that wants to be a better manager both of their own time and for teams around them. Anything that you can be doing to reduce deadlines and unnecessary unimportant work is going to be the biggest thing you can be doing to help your teams be more open to and receptive, to change and feel more engaged at work and be more creative. Because deadlines create time pressure, they create stress, they make it so we're going to be less creative. We're just really myopic. And in the moment of stuff, instead of being able to sit back and say, is this a good use of our time? What if we did this, what if we did that? And being able to have more time where you're not so stressed just makes a better work environment for everyone. And then when changes do come around, they're easier to implement because it's not this one more thing that straw that's going to break the back.

**Roger Dooley** [00:13:01]:
Yeah. Melina, if I were a boss of a certain variety and listening to you say that, I might tend to push back and say, no deadlines. If I didn't impose deadlines for important things that need to get done, stuff wouldn't get done or wouldn't get done in a timely fashion, how would you respond to that?

**Melina Palmer** [00:13:21]:
Oh, sure. Well, it's not no deadlines as much as, like you said there, that only for important things. But a question of what's important, why is it important and not having too many important and competing things at one time. So the example of the email and the unimportant work is something that takes up a large percentage of what we're doing. Some studies have shown over

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60% of what people are doing at work at any given time is unimportant. Yikes, that's not great. So if we think about things like an email and how much follow up and back and forth there is, because same, we may think that when we send an email, you probably don't hit send if you think the other person isn't going to know what you're saying to them, you think they're going to understand the point. But another study shows that half of emails are misunderstood. People don't know all of what you're talking about because we're in a rush and we're trying to do too many things at once. So if you were to be a little bit more thoughtful and send an email that people just get and then can move on, then you could conservatively reduce 25% of what you and everyone on your team is working on and then it can free up a lot of space for more important things to be done. And that follow up stuff is the slack chats, the quick drop by, the text message, the email of, oh, do you have five minutes? Did you mean are you sending the agenda or am I sending the agenda? Are we meeting in person or over zoom, who all should be invited, blah, blah, blah. All that follow up stuff. If you're more thoughtful and send less communication, that's better. It will make it so there is more room to get things done that actually matter and trying to stack and say well, all these things are important and we're going to focus on them all the time and we have ten top priority projects at any given time. That's a recipe for a lot of productive procrastination and not actually moving forward on what you want. Whereas if you tackle one thing at a time and the whole company knows or the whole department knows that this is the thing that matters right now and we have to get these things done, then you move on to the next and the next. It's a tortoise in the hair approach that will help you to be much more productive if you slow and steady actually will get you there faster.

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**Roger Dooley** [00:15:50]:
Right? Well, I think really you are appreciating the choir on that because one of the key points in my friction book is that unnecessary effort is one of the biggest problems or barriers to employee engagement that they know when their time is being wasted. And it could be by bad processes, it could be by needless work, extra emails, meetings that aren't necessary, that they're forced to attend and so on and so on. But they know when their time is being wasted and that signifies a variety of bad things to them. Maybe it shows that they're not trusted, that they have to be told these things and when they would find a way to do it themselves rather than being told exactly how to do it in an efficient manner, where there are checks and balances that aren't necessary, that consume time and so on. So yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And also your deadline thing, I do think you're making a good clarifying point there, that important deadlines are still important deadlines, but we've all had that situation where the boss had said I need this report on my desk by 10:00 A.m. Tomorrow and so we slave late into the evening to get the thing ready and get it on the boss's desk by ten and it turns out the boss is out of the office that morning or something. And that's certainly a real demotivator too.

**Melina Palmer** [00:17:05]:
Yes, for sure. But also how often have you had where you don't communicate with your team maybe as much as you or they would? Like there's something that people on your team are working on because you said it was super important three weeks ago and you were in a meeting and that project got killed and you didn't know to tell the people on the team that that's not a priority anymore. So they're just wasting time on a project

that doesn't even matter anymore. Like you said, super demotivating for everyone. But if you're touching base more frequently and if it's very clear that this is what's happening, this is what matters, then people can be only working on important projects that they're all excited about. And just as a note, every time I fill out an expense report for travel, I always think of you, Roger, and the example that you have in Friction about having to fill out the form for the coffee or at the airport or whatever it was, the $2.

**Roger Dooley** [00:18:05]:
Expense, and attach the paper receipt.

**Melina Palmer** [00:18:07]:
Right. I know. Every time I'm taping receipts to a sheet of paper to take a screenshot to send for reimbursements on stuff, I think of you.

**Roger Dooley** [00:18:18]:
Right? Well, yeah, it's funny how that resonates when I do workshops and speeches. You did a workshop where I was pointing out how ridiculous this was and everybody in the room is nodding and yeah, that's the way we do it. So it's not an uncommon, know, melina. One big change effort that's been in the headlines for the last month or two now has been Twitter, where Elon Musk assumed active control of the company and immediately began introducing really, a lot of change, to say the least. How would you view his change processes, such as we can see them from the outside in the context of the ideas in your book?

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**Melina Palmer** [00:19:02]:
Well, from what I've seen, it's not really in alignment with any of the recommendations that I'm making in the book as you have a lot of surprise happening. A lot of big sweeping changes that don't have a lot of maybe input from the team or communication as to why they're happening, why they're important, and helping to rally the troops behind you with engaged employees. I'd say kind of missed the boat on a lot of those things there, but nothing is ever really too far gone. There's always an opportunity to stop and to look at a new opportunity. I have an example in the book of called The Forest Man of India, I believe is the title of this section. And so we like to think about change. And you say, I'm just one person in a big company. Let's like, you're one manager at Twitter, you're one person that's there, and with everything around you, what could I possibly do? And it is kind of an excuse to maintain our own status quo. And what this shows is, so it's this man who started when he was little, there was a flood and there were a lot of snakes that ended up dying. And it made him very sad to see that they had all died and there wasn't enough of a forest, a place for them to be able to find refuge. And so he decided to start planting a tree every single day. And he's done that for decades now. And it's this huge rainforest in the middle of the desert that has all these animals living in it and this really amazing thing, because he's continued to just plant one or two trees a day and then they propagate and have brought in new life. And it's just this really amazing story. And sure, it would have been great if you had started planting those trees 20 years ago, but now's your next best time to go ahead and do that, and those little things can multiply in a way that can be really amazing.

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**Roger Dooley** [00:21:20]:
Yeah, I think that's a real life lesson, Melina, not just related to corporate change, but in anything that we want to accomplish. Often it's the small steps. James Clear, in his Atomic Habits book, talks about 1% change where you can be uncommonly successful if you can simply improve areas by 1%. And if you do that to enough different areas in your life, in your business, in your sport, whatever, suddenly you've got a substantial change where you are doing better than the competition. So I think that tree planting thing is a good thing. And especially since we're recording this relatively early in the year, it's not in a bad time to think about that. Instead of saying, wow, I need to make this giant change in my business, my life, whatever, just start doing those small things, but on a daily basis and maybe it'll happen.

**Melina Palmer** [00:22:16]:
Yeah, for sure. I included several what I call micro shift moments in the book. So this book is one of and it's backwards on my screen. I don't know if it is for you, but my book, it's one of overarching behavior, right? So you want to make a big change and something you're going to be consistent with, and that can feel a little bit like it's easier to tomorrow I'll start that right, some time discounting coming in there. But these micro shift moments that go in there are little things that you can go do right now to start to see a little bit of an impact. And there's half a dozen of them in there, but you can just go do that one thing and continue to do it for a week or two weeks until it becomes a habit and then you move on and have the next thing in there and it can be really beneficial.

**Roger Dooley** [00:23:08]:
One of the common topics that we encounter in behavioral science applied to business is the topic of cognitive bias or cognitive biases. And you discuss some of the common ones in the book. How do cognitive biases affect the change process? And can we first of all, can we eliminate bias with training or explaining how that bias might exist?

**Melina Palmer** [00:23:33]:
So part two of the book is all about a lot of these biases and the concepts of behavioral economics that you can be leveraging at work. And the first chapter of that is called I'm Not Biased. Right. And this problem that in business and really in life that we like to say we want to be an unbiased organization, we're going to eliminate bias. And that is not possible because our brains use biases to do all of what they do all the time. We run on bias. And so knowing that you're not going to eliminate it and you're not necessarily going to change these rules that have been written for generations in the way that we behave as a species, but to understand that they exist. And how you can instead leverage the ones that matter and maybe put in those flags for that receptionist to let the executive know when something might be off. Right? We can incorporate some sludge or some friction when we know that something could be a problem and be able to understand those biases better is something where we can have it. So they work for us, we work with them, instead of them just being something that's running the show and we don't even realize it, right?

**Roger Dooley** [00:24:47]:
What would an example be of something like that?

**Melina Palmer** [00:24:49]:

The one I talk about a lot is of fundamental attribution Error, which is a really fun we have a lot of not so great names for things when you go to apply these, but in that the example we'll say on your commute to work, if someone cuts you off on the freeway, they are a jerk. They're the worst person ever. And everything about them on their personality is that they're terrible. But if you cut someone off, are you a jerk? Are you a terrible person? No. You have those things you tell yourself of like, I was running late. I drive great most of the time, but I had to make that meeting or whatever it is. And we do this at work for showing up late for meetings, as one example, right? When someone who isn't on your team us, right. Somebody who's like your work bestie, but someone who's on that other team who you know, they're that kind of person, you go, oh, they're late again. How disrespectful, how rude. They're terrible. Don't they know how busy we all are? And we just have that initial reaction, whereas if we're late, we assume that people know. They could see I was in back to backs. I'm obviously very busy, I had to get a snack, whatever, and give ourselves the benefit of the doubt. And so this is one of those things that this is how our brains evaluate interactions with people all the time. These are some of those micro decisions, micro moments all the time. And to say, well, people should just know obviously doesn't work. So for one to know that you can expand your circles of empathy and know that if you have that moment of they're so disrespectful to imagine if this was my work bestie, would I feel the same way or would I give them the benefit of the doubt? Try to expand that a little bit. Have them be more of team us. And then also, whenever I use this example when I'm presenting, I'll say, don't get a complex about this, but you are many other people's, them in this scenario, right? So lots of

people who are saying, Molina's so disrespectful, she's late again. That's something that's happening all the time. And so to know that where you give yourself the benefit of the doubt, other people don't necessarily do that. So finding the way to shift behaviors so that you aren't a them all that often.

**Roger Dooley** [00:27:15]:
From my corporate days long ago, one of the great conflicts was always between manufacturing and sales. And there were never two groups that distrusted each other more, that had this stereotype of each other, where manufacturing would think that, well, salespeople are a bunch of liars who tell the customers anything to get the order and then not worry about it. And similar views from the opposite in the opposite direction, that manufacturing is a bunch of incompetence who could never get stuff done on time and they lie about their capabilities and so on. And when you have that initial sort of us and them situation, when one individual from the other group does something, says something, it's really easy to interpret it in the context. Like you're saying, okay, I know these people are inherently bad, so whatever they did or said is going to be interpreted in that way through that lens. And that's certainly an obstacle to not just change in an organization, but just overall organizational performance.

**Melina Palmer** [00:28:18]:
So many companies are siloed and they know it. And they then still do competitions that put departments against each other in trying to rally team morale for a specific department, which is if you have a really great culture where everyone is still team company and then you're putting groups

together, that's one thing. When you have a really siloed department with something like you're talking about where sales and manufacturing are at odds, or I know that marketing and finance are some that are at odds. Sometimes marketing and sales are at odds in HR and Frontline right, there's all these things that come up all the time in organizations. And then if you are setting up these competitions and you put sales against manufacturing in something, it's just really deepening those divides between your departments. And so if you know that you have that and you're wanting to work on silos, how can you be helping people to be connected across organizations across departments? Again, talking about how we're all team company and really helping to unite and see those other people as people that you can be connected to working on a talk about vulnerability loops in the book and ways that you can help to build trust. And doing that across departments is really important for most every organization.

**Roger Dooley** [00:29:46]:
What do you think about team building exercises at an off site that might not be at all related to work events, where perhaps you're trying to build something as part of an exercise and you force the different departments to work together. I know some of the early research on this showed. That the US them groups could be rearranged pretty easily and pretty quickly just by sort of changing the rules of the game, where now you're not competing, now you've got to cooperate to beat something else or to meet a common objective. Corporations try this periodically. What's your take, Melina?

**Melina Palmer** [00:30:20]:
I'm a fan of them when they're done well and thoughtfully, as with most

things. Right, so the forced fun without a clear objective. And I joke in the book about the virtual, like the zoom happy hours that people were having to do early in the pandemic that no one thought was fun, right. They were dot good for anybody. But there's a reason that things like trust falls became so popular and cliche, but it's not about the fall specifically, right, but it's about understanding again what you're trying to do, what you want to have at the end of this meeting and what the point is. Why are we doing any of this? I am a big fan of getting out of the norm of the space that you're in. Like, when I'm working on writing a book, I rent a house that I'm able to go to and sort of exist in that space. In book writing, I always bring some sort of a project, like a Lego set that I'm able to be building, so I get that mind wandering time on my own. And for companies having that difference of the mundane, you're able to get out of that. You get people in that kind of uncertain situation where they maybe feel a little bit vulnerable. It can be a really quick and easy way to build some of those bonds. But again, you have to make sure that you don't have everyone from one department sitting together and then another department together that if you're trying to bridge those gaps, you need to be intentionally setting up projects and things that people are doing and who they're working with and what they're talking about with that in mind. And again, it doesn't have to be hard, but it does have to be.

**Roger Dooley** [00:32:07]:
Well, you know, I think you've opened up a whole line of conversation for our next time together, Melina, with your book writing process. We'd love to dig into that, but for now, how can our audience members find you and your ideas online?

**Melina Palmer** [00:32:20]:
Yeah, absolutely. Well, happy to come back at any time. And I love talking about book writing, so that's fun, too. And so for everyone who wants to find me on the Socials, I'm thebrainybiz pretty much everywhere. And as Melina Palmer on LinkedIn, I also have it set up for you, for all of your listeners if they go to thebrainybiz.com Slash. Roger, you can get the first chapter of either any of my books for free. Depending on when you listen to this right, there might be a third book out by the time you listen to this one. We'll see. But yeah, the brainybusiness.com slash Roger.

**Roger Dooley** [00:32:56]:
Fantastic, Melina. It's been fun. Thanks for being on the show.

**Melina Palmer** [00:33:00]:
Of course. Thanks for having me.

**Outro** [00:33:02]:
Thank you for tuning in to Brainfluence to find more episodes like this one and to access all of Roger's books, articles, videos and resources, the best starting point is RogerDooley.com. To check availability for a game changing keynote or workshop, in person or virtual, visit ronchadouli.com.