

Xchange Podcast – Episode 10

Getting Your Mojo Back Using a Positive Mindset Down the Homestretch

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MICHAEL AVIS: Welcome to Xchange, the podcast for faculty, by faculty. I'm Michael Avis, faculty facilitator and professor, and I'm joined here as usual with Nicki Monahan, faculty facilitator and coach with the TLX. How's it going, Nicki?

NICKI MONAHAN: It's going all right, Mike. As anybody who's been in a meeting with you recently knows, I've got renos going on in my condo and my dog, Morley, has been barking his head off. So that's a bit stressful. But other than that, life goes on. How's it going with you, Mike?

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah. It's been great. My kids have stayed in school for the last two or three months, so we've had no --

NICKI MONAHAN: Yay!

MICHAEL AVIS: -- COVID tests. Yay!

NICKI MONAHAN: Yay!

MICHAEL AVIS: And so far so good. I'm not sure what's going to happen in January, but for now I think we're -- the ship is sailing in the right direction.

NICKI MONAHAN: Excellent. Glad to hear that.

MICHAEL AVIS: I can say, though, it's been -- you know, the weather is changing and the days are getting shorter. It's been a little bit more challenging to keep positive and to stay energized.

NICKI MONAHAN: Mm-hmm.

MICHAEL AVIS: And it's -- it's a hard time in the semester, so we're going to call this episode "Getting Your Mojo Back Using a Positive Mindset Down the Homestretch." So we'll be right back.

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MICHAEL AVIS: So, we're back. Nicki, we're back and ready to go.

NICKI MONAHAN: We are! We're --

MICHAEL AVIS: Let me just talk a little bit about what we're hearing. So we've been hearing some -- some mixed things from faculty and, as everybody knows, we spend a lot of time talking to faculty and just kind of trying to get the lay of the land. And there is some good news, believe it or not. Some faculty are saying that they've made a really good transition to

online learning, that they're enjoying it, that their students are enjoying it, that they're engaged, and it's really, really working for them. And that's something that we're really, obviously, very happy to hear. Some faculty are also saying that attendance is up, that students are adjusting, that they're using new collaboration tools, and that they're really, really working well in the -- in the classes that they're offering. We also had, during the intersession week, we had a lot of great activity at the TLX with lots of good offerings and there were some -- some workshops that were really -- sorry, really resonated with faculty. One of them was the Onenote in Teams and the Nearpod. Faculty seemed to really enjoy looking at new avenues and new ways to engage. And we also had a really packed session on pictographs and Piktocharts -- sorry, infographics and Piktochart, which really is -- is a great tool for increasing visual appeal and making your courses look as -- as modern and interesting as possible.

NICKI MONAHAN: Thanks for sharing that, Mike. It's always great to hear from the good news department and hear about faculty who are resilient and energetic and creative. But we're also hearing news from the "life can be hard" department.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah, of course.

NICKI MONAHAN: And late -- lately, we're hearing a lot of faculty say they're -- they're overwhelmed. You know, they're more exhausted than they usually are at this time in the semester and -- and some are even saying they're more tired than they're ever been.

MICHAEL AVIS: Mm-hmm.

NICKI MONAHAN: It's marking season. You know? And we've had a lot of people tell us there are a lot of challenges with assessment -- technical and otherwise -- and challenges with giving meaningful assessments and trying to give meaningful feedback to students.

MICHAEL AVIS: Mm-hmm.

NICKI MONAHAN: Some faculty are saying, gee, you know, in my synchronous sessions, if my students don't have their cameras turned on and, you know, we tell them to turn them off for bandwidth reasons, but I've had a number of people say, oh, gosh, sometimes I feel like I'm talking down a black hole and I feel kind of alone out there.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah.

NICKI MONAHAN: And my students do --

MICHAEL AVIS: That's a big one.

NICKI MONAHAN: -- too.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah. I've heard that a lot, too. Yeah.

NICKI MONAHAN: Yeah.

MICHAEL AVIS: Talking to -- talking to icons or talking to those -- those grey little body icons on Blackboard. Yeah.

NICKI MONAHAN: Right. And are my students really there or are they --

MICHAEL AVIS: That's right. Hello?

NICKI MONAHAN: -- only there, you know -- are they really doing their laundry or watching Netflix?

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah.

NICKI MONAHAN: In fact, we did have one faculty member who troubleshooted a tech issue and it was because one of their students had Netflix on at the same time. I've also had some, you know, faculty colleagues say, you know, they're just getting that feeling of being ghosted. You know, where did everybody go? So --

MICHAEL AVIS: Mm-hmm.

NICKI MONAHAN: -- it's -- it's a hard time in the semester, for sure.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah. So let's talk about getting our mojo back. How do we do that?

NICKI MONAHAN: Excellent.

MICHAEL AVIS: How do we bring the energy back? How do we bring the enthusiasm back? As you said, we are in the dog days of the semester, in between major assignments, exams coming up. How do we get this back? So, you know, that negativity is coming in all places. It's not just the --

NICKI MONAHAN: Mm-hmm.

MICHAEL AVIS: -- days and times -- days, it's the -- the crisis that we're in. It's Ontario Health. It's shutdowns, red zones, cancellations.

NICKI MONAHAN: Mm-hmm.

MICHAEL AVIS: And I think one of the things is, because we know what this is like because we've lived it before in April, I think it's creating a sense of resignation. It's -- in me, I almost feel like, oh, here we go again. I know what to expect. It's not great. It's -- actually, it's -- what's interesting is, it's not filled with that nervous energy the first time around. You know --

NICKI MONAHAN: Mm-hmm.

MICHAEL AVIS: -- like, the first time around, we were very vigilant and kind of excited, I guess, about what was happening. And now it's just, like, oh no, here we go again. So I've spoken to some really engaged, motivated faculty, and even they're finding it's really difficult to engage students. So it's a real warning flag for me when those really engaged, energetic faculty are finding it difficult. Imagine how the students are overwhelmed, struggling, and stressed. So -- I mean, that is certainly an issue that we need to think about.

NICKI MONAHAN: You're absolutely right. So what's happening in the world that -- you know, that we see on our local news channel every day is definitely filtering into our --

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah.

NICKI MONAHAN: -- reality of teaching and learning every day. And, you know, one of the things that we know is that it's really easy to get into patterns of negative thinking. And often those negative thoughts begin with "what if?" You know, everybody's got their own "what ifs." You know, what if we go back into lockdown?

MICHAEL AVIS: Mm-hmm.

NICKI MONAHAN: You know, what if we can't spend face-to-face time with our families over the holidays. So we're going to talk a little bit about positive mindsets and, you know, positive mindsets aren't about, you know, fooling ourselves into thinking everything's going to be okay when, clearly, it's not. It's not about false optimism. Positive mindsets really help us press pause on the negative thinking and kind of distinguish between what we can control and what we can't control. And I was remembering this morning when I was out walking my dog, about a -- a run-in I had a number of years ago on my way down King Street with Chef David Wolfman. And it was a typical November day. It was grey. It was blah. It was kind of rainy and I said to him, you know, hey, David. It's a pretty nasty day out here, isn't it? And he said, yeah, it is. But what's the weather going on in your head today? And I thought, what a great reframe. You know? And we spend a lot of time in our heads, so we should probably do the best we can to make them a good place to be. So, you know, today we're going to think -- talk a little bit about, you know, understanding ourselves and -- and knowing what gives us that -- that lift or that boost when everything around us is looking pretty grim. So one strategy in terms of using positive mindsets is -- is changing those what ifs to "what can." You know, so I think about -- in my life, I think, you know, what if I don't see my dad face to face again before he passes away.

MICHAEL AVIS: Mm-hmm.

NICKI MONAHAN: You know, he's in long-term care. Or what if my brother, Pete, doesn't get his back surgery again? And he's in a lot of pain. You know, if I focus on those what ifs, it really increases my anxiety. But, you know, I can stay -- say, instead, you know, what can I do? What can I do to stay connected with dad? You know, to call him even if he doesn't know it's me. And what can I do to help my brother deal with, you know, managing a lot of pain? You know, let's play some online Euchre. So, you know, really when we talk about positive mindsets, we're talking about controlling our own thinking and controlling our own behaviour so that we can really manage and cope in some pretty extraordinarily difficult circumstances. So together, you know, we put together some tips. So -- so, Mike, what are some of your favourite tips for, you know, staying positive and focussing on what we can and -- can do in a hard situation?

MICHAEL AVIS: Well, in good teaching and learning, it comes with taking -- understanding something and then putting it into practice. So I'm going to practice.

NICKI MONAHAN: Yeah.

MICHAEL AVIS: What if -- instead of saying what if there's a shutdown in January, I'm going to think -- what can I do with my kids during the shutdown that's going to be engaging for everybody? So --

NICKI MONAHAN: Nice.

MICHAEL AVIS: -- I'm already putting into practice --

NICKI MONAHAN: Nice reframe!

MICHAEL AVIS: -- for what if/what can. But let's think about students. Let's think about teaching.

NICKI MONAHAN: Yeah.

MICHAEL AVIS: Um, I remember, you know, putting tons and tons of effort into a class that I was teaching, and having everything perfect and really hoping it was going to go well. And having it go really well, but having one student say to me, this is boring. Or this is --

NICKI MONAHAN: Oh, ouch!

MICHAEL AVIS: -- or this sucks! Or, like --

NICKI MONAHAN: Ouch.

MICHAEL AVIS: -- why am I here? And, as a teacher, there's nothing that can hit you in the heart more than putting your effort into something and having one negative comment. Right?

NICKI MONAHAN: So true, Mike.

MICHAEL AVIS: I think we've all lived it. So -- I want to share and I want to focus on putting those negative comments in the background and bringing -- bringing forward the positive ones. One of the things that -- you know, I was talking to a professor as well about, you know, he -- he said, I really miss that warmth in my classroom. And I really miss that --

NICKI MONAHAN: Mm.

MICHAEL AVIS: -- warm feedback. So I said, okay, why don't you get some feedback from one of your students. Right it on a post-it note and stick it on your computer so that every day you're looking at it and you have that note or that tweet or whatever from a student saying, I appreciate your work. And then that can really be something, I think, that can, you know, make us happy and remind us why we're doing this, that we actually do love teaching.

NICKI MONAHAN: That's a great idea, Mike. I remember sitting around the faculty lounge when I taught in the Child and Youth Care Program, and the days when people will get their written student feedback questionnaires back. And, you know, you might get 50 comments and everybody's got a sad face about the bad --

MICHAEL AVIS: That's right.

NICKI MONAHAN: -- you know, the one student --

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah.

NICKI MONAHAN: -- complaint. But focussing on the -- the other 49 good ones is a -- is a great reframe. And yeah, put it on your computer.

MICHAEL AVIS: Put it on your computer.

NICKI MONAHAN: Notice it.

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah. I mean, remind yourself. Pat yourself on the back. You -- you're doing a great job. So another one, I think, is -- let's be ridiculous. Let's play games. Let's -- let's stop -- I'm not sure if the right word is "stop." But let's think about ways that we can liven the mood because, again --

NICKI MONAHAN: Mm-hmm.

MICHAEL AVIS: -- we're in this sort of situation where things are, you know, a bit dragging. How do we bring some of that back? So remember in episode three, we talked about engagement strategies and some simple things that you can do to engage your students. I mean, that doesn't only have to be in week one. That can be every week.

NICKI MONAHAN: Mm-hmm.

MICHAEL AVIS: Maybe every week you do something silly for ten minutes. Or you engage them and have them bring in their favourite music and talk about it. But something that doesn't necessarily have to be related to the -- the curriculum. But something that just is bringing the energy, bringing the humanity back. Something as simple as saying "goodbye" in the chat box in other languages and having them use emojis and have them put in gifs if they want, or videos. Something that just livens and lightens the mood and brings back the energy and says, hey, this is fun. Teaching is fun and learning is fun.

NICKI MONAHAN: That's so true, Mike. Because I think about sometimes in our team meetings and somebody put a [inaudible] gif -- or jif [phonetic spelling], I can never remember which one -- and it just gives us a boost, right?

MICHAEL AVIS: Right.

NICKI MONAHAN: So we're thinking, if we need a boost, our students need a boost. But it's kind of a mutual boost.

MICHAEL AVIS: Sure.

NICKI MONAHAN: I also had some thoughts. You know, our -- our days are long. We're on screens a lot of the time and, you know, we can be really exhausted. But, you know, building good habits is -- is -- is helpful. So maybe build in a habit that at -- at the end of your workday, just take a few minutes to -- to reflect and look back and remind yourself about what went well. And something that you -- that you feel proud of that you did in the course of a workday. You know, during times where -- where life is difficult and certainly when we're working, you know, mostly online, it's easy to feel really isolated and separate from

colleagues. So, you know, maybe something else that you can do is just check in with a colleague. Maybe one you know who might be struggling with health concerns or concerns with ageing parents or kids who are struggling. And just offer to listen for a while. You know, deep, authentic listening is a really powerful way to help people feel connected. And -- and it makes us feel better, too.

MICHAEL AVIS: Mm-hmm.

NICKI MONAHAN: And you know, and finally I -- I think the -- the practice of gratitude and appreciation is -- is -- comes from positive psychology. And one of the things that I think can help everybody is to express appreciation of the ways in which your learners are supporting one another. You know, when you drop into your students' group sessions, give them some feedback, some constructive feedback, for sure, on their projects. But don't forget to give them some high-fives, too, and -- and let's -- let's remember that positive energy is incredibly contagious.

MICHAEL AVIS: And there's --

NICKI MONAHAN: And, you know --

MICHAEL AVIS: -- there was one more I just thought about and I --

NICKI MONAHAN: Yeah, please.

MICHAEL AVIS: -- I'm just going to add this in. Go outside.

NICKI MONAHAN: Yup.

MICHAEL AVIS: I'm working from home and everybody is working from home and I'm not used to working from home. And there are days where I'll go outside to take out the garbage. It will be four o'clock in the afternoon and I have not been outside.

NICKI MONAHAN: Yeah. Yeah.

MICHAEL AVIS: So any excuse you can to take a walk, right? To -- to go to the store, to do anything just to get outside, I think is another way to kind of stay positive. Sorry to interrupt there, but --

NICKI MONAHAN: And you know -- no, no, that's all good. And you know, we all know the ways in which we take care of ourselves best.

MICHAEL AVIS: Mm-hmm.

NICKI MONAHAN: You know? So for some people it's listening to music and, you know, do I need a piece of music that's going to calm my nerves or a piece of music that's going to boost my energy? And maybe the positive mindset is thinking about, you know, have I given enough to others today --

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah.

NICKI MONAHAN: -- and do I now need to take care of myself?

MICHAEL AVIS: Yeah. And --

NICKI MONAHAN: So, um, good ahead.

MICHAEL AVIS: And we're role models for students. They're looking at us to be an example. I mean, if they can feel your -- negative energy or if they can feel that you're low on energy, they're going to -- they're going to feed off of that. So, really, we have to really make an effort to kind of lead by example and say, hey, I know you guys are feeling kind of -- I can feel the low energy. There's not a lot of conversation here. No one is going on video. Let's do something to build that up.

NICKI MONAHAN: Absolutely. So let's end on that final note of appreciation. Take a moment today to reach out to someone. Tell them what you appreciate and, you know, there's a new app that's about to be launched called "Kudos."

MICHAEL AVIS: Okay.

NICKI MONAHAN: And Kudos is an employee-to-employee appreciation opportunity. And it will give you a chance to -- to send a kudo to someone and tell a colleague how much you appreciate the way that they, you know, espouse the values, the lead values of -- of our college. And so keep your eyes open for that and -- but you don't need an app. You could do it --

MICHAEL AVIS: Yup.

NICKI MONAHAN: -- every single day. Send an email to someone. Quick teams call -- a colleague or a friend and -- and just say, I really appreciate who you are. And on that note. I'm going to -- I'm going to take this opportunity to give a big appreciation to you, Professor Michael Avis. You're my partner in crime, my collaborator extraordinaire, and my work life is better because of the great energy that you bring to it.

MICHAEL AVIS: Okay. That's totally unfair because I was going to say my first kudo will go to Miss Nicki Monahan for every day we talk. Every day we have a little 15-minute chat just to sort of check in. Finding those kinds of allies and people who can give you great advice like, instead of what if -- what can. Those are valuable, valuable assets and valuable, valuable people to keep close. So stay positive, everybody. Thank you for listening. Stay safe and stay tuned to the next episode of Xchange, a TLX podcast for faculty, by faculty. Kudos to you, Nicki.

NICKI MONAHAN: Talk to you again soon, Mike. Take care, everyone.

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