

Episode 181: Three-Legged Stool: Building Accountability Through Responsibility, Authority, and Consequences

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[00:02] ANNOUNCER

You're listening to the HR Mixtape, a podcast for leaders who want to understand people, strengthen culture, and navigate change with clarity. Today's conversation starts now.

[00:16] DR. SHARI SIMPSON

Joining me today is Caroline Quiett, Principal at Quiett Consulting, LLC. Caroline helps leaders solve performance issues with clear accountability, roles, and practical leadership systems.

[00:34] DR. SHARI SIMPSON

Caroline, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

[00:37] CAROLINE QUIETT

Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

[00:40] DR. SHARI SIMPSON

So we are going to spend a lot of time talking about a three-legged stool during our chat today, but I'd like to start here. When you walk into organizations and you start to sense that people chaos, what is the thing that triggers you to notice it first? And what made you really passionate about going down this road to help companies untangle it?

[01:05] CAROLINE QUIETT

I think in most organizations, people chaos usually manifests itself as a lack of communication and a lack of trust within organizations. Whether that's teams not trusting each other, managers not trusting their teams, it shows up in everything we do, because communication and trust are always the core of how we work together. That shows up in the data: high turnover, missed deadlines, declining revenue, losing clients, not retaining your employees. What got me interested in solving that people chaos is I genuinely love solving problems. I'm a very curious person by nature, and I'm very curious about people. Approaching human resources and leadership work from a perspective of curiosity to help solve problems is something I genuinely love doing. I'm so happy I get to do this. It's my job. It's amazing.

[02:10] DR. SHARI SIMPSON

I love that. It's always amazing hearing passion come from people in our profession because sometimes we get into it with that excitement and we don't necessarily stay in that excitement throughout our career. So it's always refreshing to hear that. All right, let's dig into the three-legged stool. What is it?

[02:28] CAROLINE QUIETT

The Three-Legged Stool is a concept I built based on something an old mentor helped me create. Put simply, it's responsibility, authority, and consequences. Responsibility is: what am I doing? Authority is: how can I do it? And consequences are: what do I get, either positive or negative, from accomplishing or not accomplishing those responsibilities.

[03:01] DR. SHARI SIMPSON

I love the consequences piece at the end. It's something I raise my own children with, the idea that life has consequences, good and bad. Bringing them into the workplace is just a natural flow of that. Where do you see organizations missing the most? What's the leg that's absent most often when you walk in?

[03:24] CAROLINE QUIETT

Consequences. Consequences is always the missing leg. And it's typically because in most organizations and within most leadership roles, when we talk about consequences, we think of negative consequences. We think of the PIP, we think of the write-up, we think of the termination. We very rarely stop to think about positive consequences. And on the authority side, quite often authority is the second-most lacking leg. Because often managers don't realize how much or how little authority they're giving their employees. But consequences, particularly positive ones, are the most under-utilized in most organizations.

[06:40] DR. SHARI SIMPSON

I appreciate that you said that. There's a lot of conversation right now in HR about what's the right balance between a PIP and genuine coaching. How do we handle performance conversations in a way that's actually constructive? And I think you've just answered a piece of that, which is we're missing the positive reinforcement side entirely.

[07:00] CAROLINE QUIETT

Absolutely. Consequences, both positive and negative, need to be clear before they happen. Not just after. That's the piece leaders miss most often. If someone doesn't know what the consequence is before they do the thing, it doesn't function as a real expectation. It's just a surprise.

[08:00] DR. SHARI SIMPSON

That's such a clear way to put it. You're not setting someone up for success if they don't know the rules of the game before they're playing it.

[08:10] CAROLINE QUIETT

Exactly. And it comes back to that trust piece. If I know what to expect from my leader and my organization, I can actually perform with confidence. If I'm guessing, I'm going to be more conservative, more hesitant. I'm going to ask more questions. And that costs everyone time.

[09:00] DR. SHARI SIMPSON

So let's talk about the authority leg a bit more. You mentioned that authority is the second-most missing leg. When you think about what authority actually means in this context, what are we talking about? Because I think people hear authority and they think hierarchy.

[09:15] CAROLINE QUIETT

Great question. Authority in this framework is really about scope: the scope of decision-making and action that an employee has. Can they send the email without approval? Can they make the budget call? Can they move the project forward without checking in first? Authority is about how much room they have to actually execute on their responsibility. And that scope needs to be defined and communicated clearly, not assumed.

[11:20] DR. SHARI SIMPSON

I think a good example of this is something I went through in my own career. I worked in an organization where the products coming out of HR needed to be perfect, buttoned up, delivered in a bow package. I moved into the company I work for now, which is a tech company very much rooted in agile methodology, which is about iteration. The expectation became: show me your draft work and we'll iterate together. That was a very hard transition, having come from an organization where you don't show draft work. You don't give them the peek behind the curtain. Thinking about your authority pillar, in one situation I didn't have the authority to show the process along the way. So all of that to say: authority can be thought of as one very specific thing, but I don't think that's always the case. What are some authority blockers leaders create without realizing it?

[12:42] CAROLINE QUIETT

Your example is perfect. One of the biggest blockers I see is that managers are either way too comfortable with failure or completely uncomfortable with it. The first archetype: the micromanager. They don't give the employee space to breathe. You have to approve everything before you can take a single step. It doesn't give the employee room to move a project forward or learn on their own. The complete opposite: the authority cowboy. The super hands-off manager who says, 'I love giving learning experiences.' But really what they're doing is: here, go ahead and swim in a hurricane. Call me if you need me. And you're like, I've never swum before. I don't know what

direction I'm going. Where am I? Both are equally setting their employees up for failure. One is hovering, one is completely absent, but both result in the employee not having what they need. A lot of leaders with the cowboy style will say, 'It's common sense, they should know.' But you're just surrendering your responsibility as their leader because you either don't feel like dealing with it or you don't realize you're doing it.

[15:40] DR. SHARI SIMPSON

I want to add something as you were talking. Maybe this is a bold statement: this is our fault for not training managers appropriately.

[15:54] CAROLINE QUIETT

One hundred percent agree.

[15:56] DR. SHARI SIMPSON

We promote people. We don't get them ready for the role. There are a bunch of reasons for that, none of them nefarious. Maybe the organization is moving too fast. That said, this is why leadership development is always in the top five on CHRO priority lists every single year. It has been for several years and I don't think that's going away because we haven't figured this out yet. And when I think about the newer generation stepping into management positions, that's going to change things up completely again. We have got to get this right. This has real financial business impact when we get it wrong. So I want to get a little positive and talk about what positive consequences can look like. What have you seen?

[17:11] CAROLINE QUIETT

Absolutely, it is HR and executive leadership's responsibility to train their employees. And it's iterative. You're never going to get it right the first time. Human beings are messy. Leading human beings is messy. It changes all the time. You need a dynamic skill set. We need to build that learning mindset in employees to create strong leaders for the future.

One thing that is often overlooked when it comes to positive consequences: people do assume it's just money. But for startups, nonprofits, organizations where you're not flush with cash, you need to get creative. And honestly, 99% of the time I talk to employees, they want really simple things. We overcomplicate this.

Employees want to be treated like people. They want to be recognized. Say thank you for delivering this project. Recognize people how they want to be recognized. If an employee wants public recognition, call them out at a team standup or an all-staff meeting. If they're not comfortable with broad public recognition, tell them in a one-on-one. Take the time every day to tell your team what they're doing well.

And one of my favorites: make sure you're talking positively about your employees in rooms they're not in. I love walking up to someone and saying, 'Your manager told me you did an amazing job on that project.' And watching their face just light up. It costs zero dollars. And it changes everything.

[20:20] DR. SHARI SIMPSON

So true. And there is a large portion of employees that don't want money as the reward. There's also the group that doesn't want public recognition. Knowing your employees is important. As we wrap up, Caroline, for those listening who want to implement one thing this week, one quick win to strengthen one leg of this stool, where do they start?

[20:56] CAROLINE QUIETT

I'd start with self-reflection. Ask yourself: if I'm analyzing how I interact with my employees through the Three-Legged Stool framework, which stool do I think is falling over the most?

If it's responsibility, focus on clarity and communication. Have I made my expectations as clear as I can? What questions would someone ask with fresh eyes?

If it's authority, ask yourself: how much space am I giving my employees to fail and grow? A great way to reframe that question: if my phone was thrown in a lake today, if I had no access to the internet, if I was gone for a day or a week, how much would actually get done without me? If not much, you need to give a little more distance. You can also ask your team directly.

If it's consequences, ask: how am I recognizing my team this week? Challenge yourself to say at least one positive thing about a team member to their face, and in a room they're not in. Simple questions to reevaluate how you're setting expectations and recognizing your people.

[23:16] DR. SHARI SIMPSON

Caroline, such a great conversation and really great takeaways for our audience. Thank you so much for sitting and chatting with me.



[23:21] CAROLINE QUIETT

Thank you so much. I've had a great time today.

[23:30] ANNOUNCER

Thanks for tuning in to the HR Mixtape. Like, share, review, and subscribe to support the show and help more people discover these conversations. Until next time, keep the conversation going.