

- [Announcer] You're listening to the "HR Mixtape," your podcast with the perfect mix of practical advice, thought provoking interviews, and stories that just hit different, so that work doesn't have to feel, well, like work. Now your host Shari Simpson.

- [Shari] Joining me today is Jeff Harry. Jeff has worked with Google, Microsoft, Southwest Airlines, Adobe, the NFL, Amazon, and Facebook, helping their staff to infuse more play into the day to day. He's an international speaker who has presented at conferences such as Inbound, South by Southwest, and Australia's Pause Fest, showing audiences how major issues in the workplace can be solved by using play. His play work has been featured in "The New York Times," Mashable, Upworthy, Shondaland, and "WIRED." Jeff believes that while we spend most of our time pretending to be important, serious grownups, it's when we let go of that facade and play that the real magic happens. Fully embracing your own nerdy genius, whatever that is, gives you the power to make a difference and change lives. Hey Jeff, thanks for jumping on with me today.

- [Jeff] I'm so excited to be here. Let's do this.

- [Shari] So if you're watching this episode, you can see that I'm recording from a official sound booth today. So Jeff and I were just chatting about that, because usually I'm in my home office doing this.

- [Jeff] Yeah, I love this. It it reminds me of the quietest room in the world.

- [Shari] Oh, yeah. I'd be curious if anybody has actually gone into that quietest room in the world. If you have, hit us up. I wanna hear all about it. So, Jeff, your background is fantastic, but it really centers in play and, you know, you boast that play can kind of solve workplace issues. And I'd love to, let's just start there. Why do you think that? Why do you think play can solve workplace issues?

- [Jeff] Yeah, so I was speaking to a friend of mine recently about this, and she was helping me with like my framework of like who I am, right? And we came up with the term of what I do as like playful healing, because I do a lot of work around healing workplaces. So whether that's dealing with toxicity in the workplace, or dealing with difficult conversations in the workplace, or just being more creative and like addressing your inner critic. And if you think of play in the workplace, most innovation, if not all innovation and creativity comes from play, right? Most organizations started as play, right? When, you know, Serge and, you know, his colleague were trying to figure out Google, they were like, can we connect the world through a search engine, right? Even Bezos back in '98 was like, can I sell books online? People forget that's how it started. So people forget that our greatest inventions, the Wright Brothers were playing and failing miserably in order to create what we now fly on on a regular basis,

right? You know, Dyson, the guy that created the Dyson vacuum cleaner, I recently looked this up. He failed 5,194 times in his basement making that vacuum cleaner. Like he counted it and the whole time he was propped up by his wife who was on a teacher's salary, you know? So this was five, six years of him doing this. And now like, you know, they're worth hundreds of millions of dollars. So I think a lot of times we dismiss play, but that is where so much of the psychological safety is. That's where you actually take risks. If you look at the organizations that thrive during the pandemic, they were playing the most. And I go back to this Alex Johnson quote that was introduced, or Stephen Johnson quote introduced to me by a play mentor Kevin Carroll. You know, you'll find the future where people are having the most fun-

- I love that.

- And that's always been true. That's always been true. And that is the basis of play right there. You wanna be part of the future and you want your staff to be part of that future, then you should be having fun at work.

- [Shari] So I feel like your definition that you just gave, I could give to any C-suite person, they'd be like, yes, I get it. I totally understand. But when the rubber meets the road and you're in the room and you're being a goofball, how have you helped executives get over that hump? 'Cause I feel like there's still so many people who are like, that's silly. It's a waste of time. I can build camaraderie a different way. I can brainstorm a different way. But I agree with you, the times when I look back at my career of my most creative moments are when I was interacting in a different way. It was standing up, maybe I was having to, you know, fake out a play or something that got my creative juices flowing to solve problems a different way.

- [Jeff] Yeah. Yeah. The way I would approach it first is, I hate forced fun, so, you know, if you're like, hey, we're gonna do an escape room, or we're gonna install a slide or some ping pong tables, and then everyone's gonna get along, like, you put Janice in a room with Timothy, you know, and then they have to escape it, they're not gonna be friends after. So, you know, I run away from forced fun, right? Like, I ran team building events for like a decade for top tech companies, and I realized a lot of times it doesn't work, right? If they're not in the right mindset to begin with. So I define play as any joyful act where you forget about time, right? Where you let go of the results. Where you're fully in the moment. Where you or your staff is pursuing their zone of genius, right? Pursuing their flow, right? They're falling into flow. So the way I see play a lot of times, it's not something that you just force at a meeting, right? It's more the idea of you build the psychological safety, you build the playground so staff can play when they're ready, right? Not when you're ready, or be like, now we're gonna have a fun meeting today. No dude, like, that's gonna be, especially if you never have run a fun meeting. I

guarantee your meeting's gonna suck. Like, you know, because you're forcing it and you're like, everyone's gotta be happy with me. And you're like, ew, gross, right? It's more the idea of going up to your staff and saying, "Hey, what is the work where you forget about time? What is the work that if I wasn't paying you to do this work, you would still do it, just because you love it so much." Maybe it's you doing your podcast, right? Like, what is that creative work? What percentage of time do you currently do that work? Oh, you only do it 10%. How can we increase it to 15 or 20? That's only like one to two extra hours a day, or one to two extra hours a week, mind you, right? But studies show when you allow your staff to pursue their flow, they're 500% more productive. Five times more productive with all of their other work because you're providing them the opportunity to do this. And Google did this with, you know, their 20% rule. They gave their staff 20% of their time to pursue whatever they wanted. They did this early on, right? And what came of that? Google AdSense, Google News, Gmail, Google Earth, like the foundations of Google, right, were built off of play. But allowing people to play when they were ready, not when you're ready. And I think that's what I recommend when I say you need to infuse more play into your work. How do you approach a problem? Are you approaching it and allowing people to solve it their way and being creative about it? Or are you forcing them to do it the same way over and over again in that pre-pandemic, you know, fixed mindset sort of way? Or are you allowing them to have that growth mindset? And are you allowing them to fail? Because that's part also of playing, allowing people to fail.

- [Shari] As you've thought about, you know, that transition for where you talked about how you were, you know, doing team building for so many years, and in juxtaposition to what you do now, how has that changed? So how do you talk to somebody now who's like, "Hey Jeff, I'd like you to come in and do a team building activity," right? And you know now like, if the organization doesn't have psychological safety, or they haven't built that up on the team, like then you're just an activity. You're not actually building the team. So how have you navigated that with, you know, with people-

- [Jeff] Well, I always go straight to the pain point. What are you struggling with, right? Most issues are around communication, right? Most issues are around psychological safety. So I'm like, let's get to that first. What is your goal? What's the feeling you want to walk away from immediately after the workshop? And what's the feeling you wanna walk away from three months from now? I just ran a workshop for a hospital, and it was about difficult conversations. And the whole idea was, you know, currently they're not having enough hard conversations in order to build that certain level of psychological safety. How are we going to measure that? We're gonna measure over the next three months, how many hard conversations are people having? Heck, how many hard conversations are you having in the next week after I run this workshop, right? So a lot of the workshops I now

create aren't like, "Hey, let's just have fun." They're more workshops of like, "Hey, do you understand who each other are?" I was just speaking to a organization in Atlanta I might pitch a program to, and I'm like, how much do you celebrate with each other? And they're like, "Oh, you know, we give recognition." But I'm like, no, how much do you celebrate each other's accomplishments, right? How much do you know about why each of you work there? You don't need to know everything about somebody, right? Be your full authentic self. I don't think most of the time you can do that. But you can find out why they're there. You know, the group I was talking to, they've been working together online for two years, but they don't know each other's why. So no wonder they can't have harder conversations. No wonder they feel a disconnect, even though they're doing all of the proper things, right? Asking the right questions like, do you feel safe? Do you feel like you can speak up? And you're like, yes, I can. But it's still a lot of performing, right? It's still a lot of acting. And that's where a lot of burnout comes from, this idea that I have to be somebody else, that I have to act a certain way, that I have to be in charge of. I'm a manager, so this is how managers speak, and this is what we're gonna do today and blah, blah, blah. And you're just like, instead of just being like, I don't know what I'm doing. Do you know what you're doing? None of us know what we're doing. Oh, that's great. Now we have a certain level of psychological safety, and we can be vulnerable enough to be like, I'm not good at these things. Great. I'm not good at these other things. Why don't we help each other out, right? And I've been recently talking about this more and more. A lot of pain in workplaces also come from hierarchy, from these like, what is it? These invisible hierarchical BS politics, right? Of like, ooh, who should be speaking up and who shouldn't be speaking up? And like, you know, when you play, you actually level the playing field. And what a manager can do, and I've told this to many managers, is recognize when you're having a difficult conversation with someone, to change the power dynamics, right? Don't have it in your office. Actually go walking, like do other things to change the dynamic, so they're willing to talk to you as a human being, and not just look at you as like, you're gonna fire me, so I'm just gonna tell you what you want to hear. Because I recently heard this, this was a while back, you know, but I'm now remembering this study, where they were interviewing C-suite executives, right? Like VPs, like second or third in command. And they were like, how many of you share your best ideas? And they were like, 85% of them were like, I don't.

- Wow.

- Because they were so worried about them being stolen. So think of it right now, most of the products we have are crappy ideas. We don't even have the best ideas of products because they don't wanna share it, because there's no trust there.

- Yeah.

- Right? So we have to be looking at that and being like, can I have an actual, honest, clear conversation with my staff, where I can reduce the hierarchy so we can talk like human beings, right? And that's even playful how to do that, because you're gonna make a lot of mistakes as you try to navigate that. But if you're willing to be open to it, then finally you can start building the relationship you've always wanted to build with your staff.

- [Shari] I like the example about getting out behind the desk. You know, some of my favorite moments with supervisors in the past have been, you know, when they walk out behind their desk and they sit in the chair next to me. They're like, "Hey, let's go walk and grab a cup of coffee," or "Hey, let's do this meeting. I know that you wanna leave the office early. Let's do it from the phone. I'll be on Bluetooth in my car and like, we can just," and the creativity of just being in a different environment in itself-

- Absolutely.

- For that conversation is fantastic.

- [Jeff] I was just running a workshop and someone came up with the idea of like, we're gonna go get ice cream during our next meeting. Great! Getting out of the office, doing something happy. I guarantee you, after they have ice cream, so many more ideas. They're gonna have so many more ideas. That's also play as well, like flipping the script on how you're working, especially if it's getting very, you know, repetitive, right? You know, and you're just like, why do we not look forward to Mondays? Because it's not fun, right? So how are you actually bringing some joy? And again, also allowing people to be more of themselves, right? Express more of themselves, so that it's not so exhausting pretending all the time. So much time we spend pretending, and so much of our time we spend trying to navigate the hierarchy that we actually cannot do good work during that time.

- [Shari] You talk a lot about positive psychology, right? That's your background. And, you know, as we were preparing, and obviously we've talked before, but as I was preparing today, I was like, you know what, I'm gonna go on Jeff's website and just refresh, right, for our conversation today. And I came across something I hadn't seen before and I probably probably missed it. I'm sure it's been up there forever. But tell me about laughter yoga. I had a great kick outta seeing that certification on your website, and I was like, so many organizations now are doing virtual yoga, right? To try to build some comradery and mental health. And I was like, I gotta ask him about this. What's laughter yoga?

- [Jeff] Yeah, so the origins of laughter yoga are fascinating. So it was a doctor that found when his patients laughed, they actually

healed quicker and left the hospital earlier.

- Wow.

- This is in India. So then he started going out to the park and then getting people, he would tell jokes, but he was horrible at telling jokes. So after a while, like, you know, people stopped coming to the park because they were bad jokes, right? But his wife was a yogi, and she was just like, "Well, are you also helping them to breathe?" And he was like, "What are you talking about?" And he's like, well, you have to breathe, you know, as part of this process, there's breathing and then there's laughter. So then together they figured out and started testing this out in India where they would just laugh and pretend laugh, and as they pretend laugh, actually that sparked real laughter. So they would do these breathing exercises, and then laugh, and then like different, and it just became this very playful thing. And now there's, I don't know, over 100,000 laughter yoga practitioners around the world, maybe more. You know, 24 hours a day, you can log in online and just laugh with other people, just type in laughter yoga and it pops up there. But yeah, it's fascinating to realize that simply just being in the space surrounded by other laughter, you can actually reduce anxiety, reduce your stress. You know, we talk a lot about, in positive psychology about how, you know, when you receive dopamine, and oxytocin, and serotonin, and endorphins, you get into flow. Well, people forget endorphins, which is where a lot of laughter comes from, is a painkiller. You literally are healing people in meetings when you get them to laugh. Now, don't do, if you're not a good standup comedian, I wouldn't start wringing out some jokes. But this idea of of being able and willing to laugh with each other, you can tell the psychological safety of a team, of an organization, of like a relationship by simply walking to the office and listening for laughter. You know, that's how you should measure whether or not an organization is doing well or not, how much laughter is actually existing and also allowed in that workplace. Because I say this a lot as well, play is the opposite of perfection, and perfection is rooted in ego and shame and constantly trying to be right. And play is rooted in curiosity, experimentation, and awe. And so much of our burnout, so much of our pain comes from, again, hierarchy and perfection. This idea that I have to be a perfect person, and I'm like, am I doing it right? Am I not doing it right? And it's just like, instead of allowing for many different opportunities to do it, many different options to get there, rather than like, you have to do it this way. And the companies and the organizations, and especially the managers that force perfection actually burn out their staff the quickest.

- [Shari] Speaking of perfection, I gotta give you major kudos. I mentioned to somebody, this was over a year ago now, like, "Hey, you know, we should do a webinar series on 'Ted Lasso.'" And then I was like, Jeff has a podcast about "Ted Lasso." I wanna talk about that.

"What Would Ted Lasso Do." Talk about a great example of somebody who had this view of psychological health and had to like change his perspective, you know? Tell me a little bit more about that. What are you uncovering on that podcast? For those listening who are huge "Ted Lasso" fans, but also understanding kind of the things that you're talking about.

- [Jeff] Yeah, so it was my friend Dimple Dhabalia idea, and she was just like, "Oh, you're a playful person. We should do this together." And she had watched the show so many times, and I've never watched the show.

- [Shari] Oh, wow.

- [Jeff] So, yeah. So, each episode, I watch it right before we record. So I haven't even seen the whole second season, right? So I don't even know what has happened, right? So people are like, you know. So the show's called "What Would Ted Lasso Do," and it's analyzing the show from a positive psychology and leadership development perspective, because Dimple and I work with a lot of organizations on leadership development, organizational development, as well as incorporating a lot of positive psychology in it. And what's so fascinating is a lot of the things I spoke about earlier, right? Like the main basis of the show is be curious, you know? And if you're trying to have a hard conversation, you gotta be curious. You can't, as I was saying last week at a workshop, you can't win conversation. Stop trying to win. Isn't that weird that we are constantly trying to win conversation? It's like trying to win playground for kids. Like you don't win playground, and most conversations, except for in a court case where you have a ruling, you know, party. But I think we always think we're in a court case and we have to prove to everyone at the meeting. Wouldn't meetings be better if we weren't trying to win, right? So like this idea of being curious is such a powerful one. You know, this idea of showing up messy. A lot of times he shows up messy. He shows up that he doesn't know what he's doing, that he's trying to figure it out, right? That he cares more about people than he cares about the result. That he doesn't care if we're winning or losing at the beginning. Oh my goodness. Well, you actually eventually will win more when you let go of the result, but you gotta let go of that perfection, right? That he doesn't give up on people. That there's certain people that he continues to show up for, even when they're mean to him, right? And he still shows a certain level of understanding, even when they're like fighting against them, right? Even when they're pushing back and he's willing to forgive. Imagine if we were willing to forgive, how much more psychological safety could we create. And then the other thing, and I'm just putting together this workshop is the title of the workshop I'm putting together is Why Ted Lassos Masculine and Feminine Leadership Matters. And it's this whole idea that he embraces his divine feminine leadership qualities, right? What are those? Collaboration, play,

following his intuition, coaching rather than controlling, right? But he also still shows up with a certain level of masculine leadership traits where he's grounded, right? And he's very clear, you know, about how he communicates to people. So finding that balance, right? You know, and the best example of that, I would refer to Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand Prime Minister who's, you know, about to step down. But she was able to embrace both compassion, empathy, and understanding towards her citizens, as well as like very clear about the lockdown and making sure she was protecting her citizens. And what happened from that? Lowest COVID rates in the entire world. That's what happens when you embrace both your healthy masculine and your divine feminine, you know? So there's so many lessons that one can learn as a leader, if you simply just watched "Ted Lasso," right?

- [Shari] I love that.

- [Jeff] That's why we have such fun doing this podcast. So just look it up, "What Would Ted Lasso Do," www.tldpodcast.com and check it out if you're a huge Ted head.

- [Shari] You know, it's interesting when you talked about winning, you know, somebody gave my husband this advice in marriage several years ago, and I think it's genius, and I think it's applicable to business as well. But when you're having a conversation with someone, especially somebody you care about, right? Coworker, peer, spouse, partner, whatever, and you're thinking about winning, that means the other person's gonna be the loser. And that means you're married to a loser, you're working with a loser.

- Oh, interesting.

- Your boss is a loser. And I was like, oh man, like when you think about it that way, it's like, I don't wanna be married to a loser. Like that's not the approach I wanna take. And so it has really helped us take pauses in our own conversations, both at work and at home, and be like, okay, am I trying to win this argument? Or are we trying to solve the problem? So I really like those examples.

- [Jeff] I mean, that's such a good point, because think about it, even when you win a conversation, you lose, because that person doesn't hear you, right? So, and what do we want most out of a conversation? We want to be heard, we want to be understood, we want to be seen, right? Like, "Avatar," I see you. What do you think the other person wants? The exact same thing, right? So I put this out there and, you know, my friend Eric Bailey wrote like a whole book about this of like, when you go into a conversation, you need to know if you're ready or not to go in. And if you still want to be right, instead of understand, you're not ready to go in that conversation. You're just not ready to have it and that's okay. But you can't do both. You can't be right and understand at the same time, right? So

how are you actually going into that conversation? And how are you allowing that person to be heard at the same time that you want to be heard? And that is really hard for us to do. But the more we do that, the more we actually have connection and connection, especially in positive psychology, the whole point of positive psychology from, you know, Dr. Marty Seligman who founded back in the 70s, is that other people matter. That's the whole point, you know? And when you realize that, you do better work when you recognize other people matter. And you're seeing right now the exact opposite from organizations like Google and other tech companies that are just straight laying people off. I mean, this is Google, right? I thought y'all, you know, brag about psychological safety and how you're at the forefront, and one of the best places to work. There are people, if you read a Business Insider article that just came out, there were people that were there for 17 years, found out via email that they were getting laid off. Other people found out based off their fob whether they could scan in or they couldn't scan. What is this, high school? Like, what is this? What are we doing here? There was someone that was there at 5:00 AM to do a job and then they couldn't get in, and that's how they found out. You know, like, why are we, where are we going? You know, like, we're really at a crossroads. I keep saying this in a lot of the workshops, whenever I'm traveling around. We're at a crossroads of choosing what type of working world do we want to go into, right? Do we want to go to the antiquated past where we treat people like a number? Or are we finally willing to embrace a level of shared humanity, shared compassion and shared empathy? But to do that, we have to push back on that level of treatment of staff. I get it, you gotta lay off 12,000 people. I get it that you're worried they'll, you know, from a law standpoint that they might sabotage, but you still can treat 'em like human beings. You can still sit with someone face-to-face and let them know, you know. But just like doing it, like what are you ghosting like this is Tinder or Bumble? Like, come on now. We can do better than this. We can do better than this.

- [Shari] I've told people before and managers I've coached that the exit experience should be just as good as the entrance experience in an organization if you're doing it correct. If you get to that point where you have to have the hard conversation, nobody should be surprised that it's coming. Or if they are surprised, there should be grace in giving the message, right? And having your ducks in a row. If you are in this situation where you have to lay people off, are you coming at it with compassion in that you have the resources? You have built in time for them to come back and ask questions. You know, I think if you get anything from this episode, it's people matter, like you said. Let's get back to the core of people mattering, and building psychological safety, and having positive intent, and using play to be creative, right? Because people matter and we wanna make sure that we're living in environments where people can be their best selves.

- [Jeff] And I'm trying to find this, Stripe had to cut 14% of their

staff, but the letter that they wrote, the letter that the CEO wrote was really well done, because they laid out what was going on. It was all about the employee, you know. How they were gonna address their benefits, how they were gonna address their health, how they were gonna give them good patches as they're leaving, if they need references. There's a certain level of compassion if you wanna look at a way in which to lay people off the right way or a better way. Not the perfect way. But again, it's this idea of showing up messy and being like, we messed up, right? You know, instead of being like, "Oh, sorry, we hired too many people, so now we gotta fire so many people." Did you not think about this when you were hiring? Did you not let people know that this was a possibility, right? And also, do you not care about loyalty, right? Like you speak about it and you ask so much of your employees, the fact that they're giving 60, 80 hours a week. I think about that person that was there for 17 years. How many birthdays they missed, how many functions they missed with their family, and then you're gonna lay them off via email. Like, come on now. Like, come on. Like, not only does that hurt that person, but that hurts your soul. You know, that challenges you as like, do I like me as a person? Do I like me as an individual, you know? And if we're going to be devoting 2000 to 2,500 hours a year to an organization, I don't want to have to feel like I'm selling my soul in order to do that.

- [Shari] Well, Jeff, thank you as always for such great insight and great conversation. I will make sure to put a ton of the stuff we talked about in the show notes, a link to the podcast that you do, a link to the "Ted Lasso" show, if you haven't seen it. It's on Apple. You should definitely check it out. And then, you know, if you want you can check out Jeff's certification on yoga laughter, because I think that's freaking amazing. So Jeff, thanks for taking a few minutes.

- [Jeff] Oh, thank you so much for having me. And I will say, you know, as we're logging off, to all the listeners, I challenge you to challenge the hierarchy, I challenge you to show up messy, and I challenge you to play, and just see if your day is better at work, because I have a strong feeling it will be.

- [Announcer] I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at thehrmixtape.com. Come back often and please subscribe, rate, and review.