

- 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.

- Joining me today is Tara Beaton, owner of her own consulting company. After decades of helping people return to work following disability, Tara received her own diagnosis of ADHD. Now adding her own first-person experience to her 25 years of disability management, HR, and training expertise, Tara offers insights and guidance to professionals and leaders on best practices in inclusion, accessibility, and accommodation for neurodiversity, disability, and mental health. ♪ Oh, yeah ♪ ♪ Bring the funk back ♪

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

- Well, you're very welcome. It's my pleasure to be here with you.

- You have a journey that's genuinely inspiring and I'd love if maybe you could talk about how did your personal ADHD diagnosis really change your perspective on disability management and accessibility? Because you were diagnosed a little bit later in life.

- Yes, I was, and this is an experience that a lot of people have been going through, in particular since the COVID-19 pandemic, and especially women. So, it's definitely been an eye-opener and an experience for me. In terms of how it's changed my perspective on disability management, I want to say that, generally speaking, there is no change. From my perspective, disability management is something that has always taken into account various types of so-called disability and diversity, but I would say that those practicing disability management, either as a specialty or on the side, as well as employers in general, I think what they may be able to benefit from is to think about doing next with neurodiversity what they've already been asked to do and been quite successful doing in many cases with mental health. So, traditionally, disability management has been very focused over the years in working with physical and sensory disabilities in the workplace, and there's been a wonderful progress in terms of learning more about mental health, mental illnesses, and accommodating psychologically in the workplace, and I think what we're just going to see now is a lot more attention being given to cognitive impairments, cognitive disability in the space of disability management, and just learning about how to understand what that experience is like for employees and the fact that it is really just another way of being in the world, and I would say the same goes for accessibility as well.

- You've talked about ADHDers having superpowers, and I'd love if you could dive into how you've seen some of those superpowers really manifest in the workplace.

- Absolutely. I just love this term, and now that I've really had an opportunity to sort of delve into this community that exists of fellow ADHDers, I love the positive spin that's being put on the experience of having this and other neurodiverse conditions. Folks with ADHD, it's important that everyone in general, and not just employers, focus not just on the idea that there may be a need for accommodation for impairments or different ways of thinking and so on, but there are some definite benefits to having employees with conditions like ADHD or with this type of neurodiversity. It's been demonstrated that that they or we can bring fresh perspectives, a great deal of creativity, pattern recognition, math. Many are very skilled in math. I'm not one of them. These are on a spectrum, as you can imagine. Many folks with ADHD have the gift of hyperfocus. It doesn't always feel like a gift when you're hyper-focused on something that you don't necessarily want to be, but it can be absolutely fantastically beneficial in workplaces. Proactivity, certainly resilience, holistic thinking, lateral thinking, and so on. I did notice there was a recent article from Minnesota Neuropsychology as well on the superpower brought of divergent thinking and even intuition, and not in the sense of like the woowoo aspect of intuition, but the ability to make connections and leaps that others don't. So this can be a really valuable trait that can be brought into the workplace.

- How have you seen HR professionals start to bridge that gap between, and I'm using air quotes here, traditional workplace norms and the need for more neurodiverse options or more options for neurodiverse individuals?

- I think the terms that you've used themselves are key, this idea of traditional and the norms. Traditional approaches to things can sometimes be tried and true, and sometimes they can be a little less useful as we progress over time, and norms are just that. Norms are the average way that folks look at things and have tended to be approached, and when we're talking about diversity and certainly neurodiversity, we are talking about the opposite of that. We are no longer talking about the neurotypical. We're talking about the neurodivergent, which in and of itself means we're outside of the norm, so how can HR professionals bridge that gap? I would encourage them to be really critical, and by that, I don't mean to criticize. I mean to question everything. Why are things the way that they are? Why do we set up our recruitment, our selection, our promotions the way that we do? Who might not be included in the way that we have set this up? And what could be done to allow for greater neurodiversity while still getting the job done and perhaps even better?

- What are some of the misconceptions you think exist out there around, you know, those that are neurodiverse? We talked a little bit about the superpowers, but there's definitely some myths that are not positive. Maybe you can debunk some of those for us.

- Oh, I'd be happy to. I don't think anyone is more aware of these myths than people with ADHD themselves. One of them is that someone with ADHD is just hyperactive and can't settle down and may not be able to just sort of get down to business and focus, or may blurt something out and be an embarrassment. There's all of these sort of stereotypes that can come along with these conditions and they're just not true. Are there certain aspects of neurodiversity that people have to contend with? Absolutely, but there are many strategies that are available to help with those, and as we become more and more flexible and open and accessible in our workplaces, these things become less and less of an issue because we know that what the employee is bringing to the workplace is so much more valuable than some of these maybe misconceptions that people may have, and I would say the other big myth is that it's difficult to accommodate ADHD. I think where this comes from is the lack of understanding and knowledge about conditions in neurodiversity and what is available. Like any other type of accommodation, accommodating ADHD or making an environment more accessible for neurodivergent folks really normally costs nothing at all. It just requires a bit of a different way of looking at things, being more flexible, and, many times, the answer is available from the employee themselves, so I would say that those are some myths that we can certainly set to one side and employers can feel confident moving forward.

- You know, something you said kind of sparked this idea in my head that we probably have more neurodiverse employees in our population than we're probably aware of. What can we do to help foster an environment where they feel comfortable asking for maybe some of these accommodations that we've talked about?

- So I think the message here is really the employer is in a very important position of setting up a workplace, an environment, a culture where people feel comfortable being able to bring forward when they have needs that help them do their best work, and I know we talk a lot about culture and I know that there's more attention being given not just to diversity, equity, inclusion, but belonging, and that belonging is sort of that feeling that people get, that, yes, this is an equitable work environment. I am included. So what I would say to employers is it's one thing to encourage disclosure. It's another to set things up in such a way that people feel very comfortable being able to come forward, knowing that their requests will be accepted with respect and will be kept confidential to the extent that they would like, and that really is the key to being able to help employees get to a place or be at a place where they can ask for the help that they need to bring their best selves to work and do their best work.

- As you've worked with employers who have instituted a more broad view of, you know, this discussion around accommodations, have you seen some ripple effects of accommodating those that are neurodiverse

and its impact on actually improving the entire organization in kind of that discovery phase of having a conversation about accommodation?

- Oh, absolutely. I'm thinking of an example. I was working with a gentleman who was a very high performer, but was starting to have difficulty and couldn't quite figure out what was going on and it really started manifesting itself in other ways at work that looked a lot more like anxiety and depression, and, sure enough, while he was getting support for his health and wellness, he was diagnosed with ADHD. So, part of getting him back to work really involved identifying the barriers that were getting in the way for him and then addressing those, and in his case, the two biggest barriers were, number one, that the meetings that were being held were all verbal with no written follow-up, and, number two, there was really not a lot of variety in his tasks. There might be over the long term. So, for example, a variety of tasks over the course of a month, but in his particular situation, he needed more frequent variety in his work, and so, as part of his return to work plan, we were able to incorporate those two things and actually build a routine that included that type of variety for him, as well as following up from verbal meetings with quick written snapshots that was able to help him with his recall and understanding of what was discussed and what was expected. This was so successful that these strategies were adopted on a broader level, and other employees as well were saying, "You know what, this is extremely helpful." So it was not just an accommodation for one person, but it translated into a broader practice that is ultimately going to lead to greater accessibility for the entire organization.

- I love that. I love stories when we kind of thought we were addressing one problem or scenario, I shouldn't really call it a problem, and it has this positive impact or this wave of positivity across other things. I think that's just fascinating.

- Absolutely. We call that the curb cut effect.

- Oh, I love that.

- Yes, because cutting curbs originally was brought in for accommodating, say, you know, wheelchair users, but as you know, it can be very helpful for a lot of folks. For example, if you're pushing a stroller or things like that. So, yes, those sort of unexpected add-on benefits that help everybody and not just the segment of population that it was intended to help.

- As you think about the future of neuro-inclusive workplaces, you know, what do you envision, and how do we as organizations start to take steps to prepare for that future?

- My vision of neuro-inclusive workplaces is one of full accessibility. This is a long road, but I think it's a road that we

are ready and able to walk together. There really is a place for everyone, both in society and in the world of work. I think COVID-19 really taught us, especially the multitude of us who shifted from either working from home or managing people remotely. It taught us that we had been making a lot of assumptions about the way that work needed to be done, and I think we can continue to learn from that. People do want to work. It's fulfilling. It gives a sense of purpose and structure, routine, meaning, identity, et cetera. So having this vision of a more accessible and inclusive workplace will allow us to make space for everyone to be in our workplaces and also to really celebrate our differences.

- If there's one piece of advice or take-away that you have for HR professionals as we wrap up our conversation that you really want them to walk away with, what is that?

- Ask why. I think that human resources professionals, now more than ever, are in a position of strategic importance for organizations and should really feel empowered to be able to ask some of the tougher questions. In order to make any kind of change, we need to be willing to take the existing ways of doing things and be willing and have the courage to pull them apart and just ask why. Why do we do things this way? Is it because it's efficient? Well, for whom? Is it because this has worked in the past? Well, are we heading to the past or are we heading to the future? I think that having the courage and getting into the habit and making it part of our process to be critical and ask those questions and question assumptions is really the one thing that I would recommend that HR professionals take away.

- All right. Thank you so much for such a great conversation.

- Thank you so much, Shari. It's been my pleasure.

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