

- 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 Mark Cruth, modern work coach at Atlassian. Focused on practice over theory, Mark is a pragmatic, modern work designer and coach with over a decade of experience experimenting with teamwork practices at places like Boeing, Nordstrom, Charles Schwab, and Rocket Mortgage. Mark's mission is to inject modern ways of working, a transformation mindset, and the power of expert storytelling into everything he does. Hey, Mark, thanks for joining me on the podcast today.

- Shari, so awesome to be here. I'm super excited to be talking with you and actually talking with your audience today. It's gonna be great.

- You are a super exciting person. I've been following your travels the last couple weeks online and the energy you bring, even in your social media posts, I feel like are hopefully gonna come out to our listeners as we have this chat.

- You know, people describe me, they characterize me as a, I think it's a golden retriever puppy, so I'm guaranteeing you that's going to come out here. It's just part of who I am.

- I love that. I haven't looked, please tell me that's on your LinkedIn headline.

- You know, it's not, but I think I need to put it in there because there's no better way to characterize me, I think.

- I absolutely love it. So you're a part of Atlassian, and they have a really unique perspective on really emphasizing and unleashing that team potential, and you spend a lot of time in that space. So I'd love to hear how do you think some of these modern work practices are influencing employee engagement within the company.

- Oh, and you know, it's fascinating. Atlassian, as an organization, our mission is to unleash the potential of every team. And some of your listeners might be like, "Who is it Atlassian?" And so for us, we build collaboration software. If you've ever used Trello or Jira or Confluence, we build those. But one of our biggest focuses has always been how do we actually help teams work together? And really today, we're kind of at a renaissance of good teamwork in my opinion. We've come out of this pandemic thing that showed us that we can do distributed work in okay ways, and we also found that we can do it in really terrible ways. And the delineator that we're seeing here has to do with the fact that those practices that we thought we knew, how to

work as a team, actually weren't there, they were kind of faux practices. There were things that we thought, oh yeah, I just assume I know what I'm working on. And for us, as we think about modern work practices, and the reason we call them modern work practices, it's the things you need to do, how to do today. It's how do we become aligned as a team? How do we make sure we understand what we're working towards? And when I think about employee engagement, one of the biggest things, even Gallup talks about it in their employee engagement work, is that one of the biggest indicators of engagement is actually feeling aligned and included in the work that you're doing. And so, for us, and our mission is all right, if we're gonna unleash these teams, we gotta help make sure that one, they're aligned, they feel like they're going in the right direction. They're not sitting out there, especially when you're distributed wondering, huh, I wonder what's happening with my team in other parts of the world? How do we help that, because that's what brings people out. That's what brings them into the conversation and feels like they actually wanna contribute. So that's where we're looking at this at from.

- Have you seen, as you've implemented these practices, or do you have a story maybe where a team wasn't as cohesive or as productive or dynamic, but once you started to teach them these concepts that you really saw a transformation?

- So the one I always go back to on this one is actually a team I coached last year. So a part of my role at Atlassian, I actually work with our customers and some of their teams. So, we're a tooling organization, so a lot of the teams we work with are admin teams, these teams that will go and implement your software. Think of a service desk, things like that. Well, this team, they realized they weren't working really well together, and they weren't actually solving the problems for their customers. They would go and implement something, maybe a Jira project or Confluence base, but it didn't actually answer the questions for their customer. And so we actually went in, and I spent some time with 'em for about 10 weeks just helping them to one, align on what is their purpose, what are they trying to do? And initially, our first conversation was, "I don't think your purpose is to simply take requests and implement that." "I think that's probably a little bit bigger than that." And so we spent about 10 weeks aligning on things like their purpose, how they wanted to work together. A big tool that I like to use, it comes from our Team Playbook, it's called a Working Agreement, having them understand how they wanna work together to accomplish their ultimate purpose. It's helping them understand their actual network that they're in within their organization. Who are you actually impacting and who are your customers? And it was working with them through this. We transformed them in a way from just an admin team to what I like to think of as almost like a change consultancy within this organization. And what I mean by this is that what they did is they went from task

takers, they went from ticket movers to someone who now, they get a request in, and they say, "All right, our purpose is actually "to help our customers solve problems "through efficiency in our tools and good practices." And so what they would start doing now is now they would actually run a consulting kind of gig with that person, so they'd request something and say, "Okay, cool, let's find out "what you were trying to do, because for us, "we know it's not just about solving your ticket, "it's about trying to actually help you solve your problem." And it was amazing, one, the vibe that changed in that team. Going back to that word engagement, talk about people buying into something bigger than themselves at this point. They believed in what they were doing, and they've continued to evolve that. And it's a team I've continued just to stay close to over the last year, because now they're trying to see how do they take it from just their portion of the organization to the entire organization as this idea of how do we help not just, again, take these tickets, implement these things to actually solve problems. And so for me, I always go back to that one. It was with one of our customers actually, you can actually find a case study about them, Dish Network. It was such a great experience we had, and we're continuing to see that grow and thrive there.

- I love that. I'd love if you could talk a little bit about Work Agreements, and I know I didn't send that question to you in advance, but-

- Oh no, my favorite topic.

- And it's something that we've talked about on our team. So we recently got a new leader, and we filled out this, I'll call it a survey. It was less formal than that. But one of the things was, "When are you most productive?" And one of the things I put on there is "If you schedule a meeting with me at 3:00 PM on a Friday, "you are getting zero productivity out of me, "no creativity, I'll be at the meeting, "but that's not the time."

- 100%, and it's amazing. So, Working Agreements are honestly the secret weapon for teamwork in my opinion. Those are the things that if you want to create engaged, motivated teams, get rid of the nuance, the mud in terms of how we work together. It's all about clarity. And so, what I love about Working Agreements is they can be as detailed or as high level as you want. The idea is for the team to have it. But for us, we actually usually recommend teams start with a couple different topics and focus on those, so things like what you just mentioned, things like, what are your personal preferences, what do you need, and then from that we say, "All right, now here's what everyone needs. "Now let's talk about how we then work as a team. "What are the things we need to know as a team?" Maybe we're distributed around the US, and we've got people West Coast, East Coast. We say, "You know what, maybe we should have some core hours "when we're all around knowing "that this is our collaboration time,

"maybe from 12:00 to 3:00 PM eastern." And we say, "That's our time, awesome. "Let's document that and actually say what that is." We also say, talk about what kind of meetings or rituals you wanna have as a team. What are the outcomes of those? So you're not just going to an a meeting after a meeting and being like, "All right, what are we trying to do?" You actually know that, and you agree to it as a team. Also, things like escalating issues amongst the team. One of the biggest challenges we see is that when something comes up, and if a team hasn't talked about how they wanna raise concerns, those things fester. And, of course, as we think about engagement, they start sliding backwards because they're like, "I don't know how to bring this up," so let's talk about that. And then honestly, one of the biggest things I love, how do we wanna improve as a team? Because so many teams don't think about that, especially outside of... Where I started was in software. And so, software has a lot of different methodologies that brought about an idea of continuous improvement, iterations, those sorts of things. But as I've talked a lot with HR, marketing, finance teams, one of the biggest elements I always see missing is a continuous improvement process, how do we wanna get better? So this forces us to actually think about that. So for us, that's for me, the power of a Working Agreement is again, I like to say, making the implicit assumptions we have as a team, explicit, and that take goes miles for allowing us to actually work better together.

- You've worked in some pretty big name companies, Boeing, Nordstrom, and with the work you're doing now, I'm curious, have you seen approaches to employee engagement that are different, that are the same? And then, we're gonna add in that international layer on top of that, what are the common things that yes, these are the core and then maybe the customization levers that you've seen in different organizations?

- I think one of the biggest things I've seen across every organization, when it comes to employee engagement, is a desire to try to understand it. And so that is, whether it be through surveys or some sort of questioning, I've never seen an organization that says, "No, I don't care about that. "I'm not gonna ask people." So every organization, regardless of size, and actually even international location has always been seeking that kind of information. I think the biggest differentiator, and I don't think it's a surprise, is what we do with that information at the end of the day. Large companies, I found very large organizations struggle to figure out how do they feed that elephant. They get all this information, what do we do about it? And smaller companies tend to work a little bit more nimble around that, because guess what, there's not as much information. But the things I've seen around those that succeed with actually doing something about the feedback they receive in terms of understanding what their people are looking for, what's maybe pulling them back, what's pushing 'em forward, has been to actually go back and say, "It's not at a corporate level that we need to solve this. "It

actually goes back down to the team." So giving this information to team leaders to have them actually work with their teams and say, "Hey, here's our information. "Here's how it relates to the organization. "What do we wanna do?" And giving some of that autonomy to team leads, to even directors and those parts of small department heads to be able to say, "Hey, it's your role to help figure out "how you want to address this within your group." And there's some things that are, of course, at a corporate level if we're thinking benefits or pay, things like that. But most of the time, engagement isn't based off those. It's based off things like making sure we have clarity around the problems we're trying to solve. It's making sure we have a worthwhile problem to solve, and that really comes down to actually understanding it. So, I found that giving that autonomy, the agency to allow people to do that and actually encouraging it has been big. And even at Atlassian, we have a, we call it a, what is it, it's a tip survey. It's all about understanding our people and what they're looking for. And so for that, that survey results immediately gets sent to people leaders and their managers. And the idea is that every quarter when we run this, each leader is to identify what's one thing you wanna try? And then they report back to their leadership on that, because the goal is not just surveying people, it's actually trying to do something with it and actually seeing if the needle turns.

- I could not agree with that sentence more. So many times as an employee over my career, I've taken surveys and you're like, "What happened to that data? Did anything change?"

- There's nothing more disengaging in my opinion, in my experience, than having to take a survey where they say, "How are you feeling right now?" And then nothing ever comes from that. Or like, "What are you lacking?" And then I share that feedback, because guess what, when you don't do anything with that, I like to joke around, it's the same thing as in a retrospective or a reflection exercise where you do that, and if we don't do anything with it, it's just good group therapy. We're just gonna talk about it, but it's not like we do anything about it. Actually, it's not even good group therapy if you really think about it, because usually out of that you've got some sort of thing you're doing afterwards. It's really just us talking, and so you're going to shut your people down then. And that's the problem is now all of a sudden, you wanna do something, but guess what, you've already shown your people that you're not listening. So if you're gonna get engagement, you've got to start taking actions, and actions are everything, that's the thing, actions are key.

- So you've talked about authenticity, you've talked about Working Agreements. When you're coaching teams, what are some other key strategies or insights that you emphasize with them to really boost their engagement and ultimately, collaboration against business initiatives?

- So I think the biggest thing for me here is to start with small chunks of how we get teams aligned on their work. One of the resources that we have that's free out there for Atlassian, or for everybody, it's from Atlassian, is what we call our Team Playbook, and it's a set of different practices that we have that talk about how we work, but they're really just generally good practices. And you don't have to use our products, it's just really good ways of working around, again, everything from how we collaborate as a team, but also across teams. And when I think about the strategies I use when I'm actually working with a team to try to bring them from zero to one on that engagement scale, the biggest things I do is I focus on what we call this idea of shaping that team, because I honestly think it goes back to what I said earlier, places like Gallup and others have found that the biggest elements at play into good engagement is feeling included, feeling like you've got a greater purpose, elements like that. And the biggest things for us is we've identified a couple different activities that we run with a team. So again, I mentioned that idea of aligning on your purpose. I like to run a play we have called a team poster. It's all about understanding who we are, what we do, why we do it. We do things like let's get clarity around our roles and responsibilities. Another activity we do, I mentioned Working Agreements, that's one I always do with teams. And then another one I do, because it really goes back to the reality of our work today is run this thing called the Network of Teams, which is all about not necessarily identifying and handling dependencies across teams, but it's about building relationships across teams. 'Cause I think many times when we do our work, and one of the things that actually can kill engagement is that when we're trying to get work done as a team, and we don't have a good relationship with this team over here that's necessary for us, we don't feel like we can move forward. So we build those relationships, all of a sudden, work feels a little bit more smoother, it feels a little bit more fun. And so for me, those four activities are things that I like to run. And honestly, every team I work with, those are my first core bits. Like, let's get you teaming well together, and if I get you teaming well together, now we can really start handling the little nuanced pieces of engagement, because engagement starts with the team, in my opinion.

- When you've talked to HR professionals, what is the one thing that we're getting wrong when it comes to this? 'Cause we're all trying to solve this problem in every organization. I'm sure it's part of our initiatives. What are we getting wrong?

- Hmm, I honestly think it has to do with trying to probably bite off too much. We try to solve the whole problem at this point. When we think about it, I just talked about the team level, but then they're scaling things. It's rolling something across an organization. It's almost that lack of experimentation. If I think about it, if we roll back time, and for your listeners out there, if you were ever part of a small scrappy HR team, one of those teams that was like three or

four people for a thousand people organization, you had to experiment a lot. You had to go try a lot of different things as you kind of built that up. I think we lost some of that experimentation, some of that wonder that we had there. And going back to how we solve even just our basic engagement teamwork issues today, it's going out and saying, "All right, "we don't have to have it all figured out, "but let's have a hypothesis of what we think we can try "and actually go try it with some teams "and actually set aside that time "and make it a goal for us." Because I think if we rely on things like process and procedures to actually get us saying, "Hey, this is a new policy we have. "All teams are gonna go through this," doesn't feel really engaging to me. I want my HR professionals out there on the ground actually experiencing this with teams, because I think that's why we got into this role. That's why we got in there. It was the people piece. And so we've gotta be with our people trying these things, and I think HR has such a great opportunity to actually help move, whether it be distributed work, as we think about how we work across the world, whether it be, hybrid work in terms of the dynamics there, all of those things are predicated on this idea that those teams are working well together. So if you wanna solve for any of those other problems that you're probably hearing a bunch about in your organization, solve for the team first, and if you do that, the rest starts sliding into motion.

- As you think about the future of employee engagement, is there any trends on the horizon that you're really excited about?

- Well, I have to say AI, that's the thing today, right? Obviously.

- Well, I will say AI has an element of that. I honestly think one of the trends when it comes to engagement is, the analogy I like to use we're seeing the same trends coming into work that we see in our personal lives around things like self-selection and customization. And so when I think about the world of work I live in, it's the ability to choose how I wanna learn, when I wanna learn. It's the ability to choose even benefits, things that I hold as valuable and customize 'em for myself. I've got 16 different subscriptions to different cable televisions, because I have different wants and needs. I want the same thing in work. And so for me as an individual, as I'm thinking about what my future work life will be is it won't be something where it's very static. It's going to be a dynamic. I wanna be able to shift. I wanna be able to change priorities. I need to be able to continue to follow that purpose I have, but to be able to do it in different veins in an organization. So the smoother we can get with interoperability between teams, being able to move between teams, the better, in my opinion. And so, when I think about AI, 'cause of course, I gotta talk about AI, I think AI is gonna play a role in helping us to make that a smoother transition. It's about connecting those dots. How do I help get rid of some of the load of some of the work that computers are good at, but let me be creative, let me play

to what I'm trying to do in a creative, fun way, and then use AI to help disseminate, to help build those sorts of pieces. So for me, I think that's what I'm excited about. It's almost what we're gonna start seeing around the customization, the change in terms of what that employee experience looks like.

- And that's definitely what Gen Z wants. They've grown up with everything being customized for them, and I don't mean in a handheld way, just meaning that the feeds in your Instagram, the feeds in TikTok, it's all customized by the content you're consuming. So what if we think about the future of our benefits offerings the same way, think about development opportunities-

- I just signed for up my Verizon, and now they're using options, like you could pick your perks. There's 15 perks, pick the two that work for you. I was like, "Oh that's clever, that's clever." And I think we're gonna start seeing that at work.

- Yeah, definitely. Mark, this was a great conversation, excited about the work you're doing. I will make sure to put in the show notes, a link to that Team Playbook that you talked about, 'cause I'm sure those who are listening are like, they wanna get their hands on that.

- Go try it.

- So Mark, thank you so much for spending a few minutes with me.

- Ah Shari, thanks for having me.

- I hope you enjoy today's episode. You can find show notes and links at the hrmixtape.com. Come back often and please subscribe, rate and review.