

# HR Mixtape: Episode with Shari Simpson and Dr. Steve Yacovelli, Owner and Principal of Top Dog Learning Group, LLC

## **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 Simpson:**

Joining me today is Dr. Steve Yacovelli, owner and principal of Top Dog Learning Group, LLC. Dr. Yacovelli specializes in fostering inclusive leadership and creating impactful, diverse organizational cultures. He uses his extensive experience in leadership development, empowering leaders to drive authentic LGBTQ plus allyship in workplaces. Steve, thank you so much for sitting down and chatting with me today.

## **Dr. Steve Yacovelli:**

Thank you, I'm so excited to be here, especially at the SHRM conference as well.

## **Shari Simpson:**

Yes, this is one of my favorite conferences of the whole year, so I'm glad that we were able to do this live. Your background, your vibe, your LinkedIn presence, it screams everything that I wanted to learn about you and the work you're doing, and very well done.

## **Dr. Steve Yacovelli:**

Thank you, thank you. You showed up very authentically, which is important.

**Shari Simpson:**

Thank you, thank you, that's the plan. Speaking of authentic, right, I want to focus on allyship and how does authentic allyship really work compared to some of these performative gestures we've seen in organizations?

**Dr. Steve Yacovelli:**

Yes, the rainbow washing every June. The pink washing every October. Yeah, it's, you know, what's sad and interesting in these weird and wonderful times is, and I'll just speak on behalf of the queer community being the gay leadership dude, but not speaking on behalf of every queer person in the entire planet, but what I hear in my circles, as well as with my client partners and DEI in general, is that this shakeup of diversity, equity, inclusion, and what's happening is kind of showing the true colors, no rainbow pun intended, of companies who really are true allies. What I find fascinating is the companies who really back down when there was a little bit of pressure under their fire under their feet, it's going to come back and bite them. And when you start to see the numbers of Gen Xers coming into the workplace, when you start to see, I mean, you know, I'm in my, my, I'm a Gen Xer and I'm in JZ here, excuse me. But as a Gen Xer, I mean, I haven't touched Chick-fil-A in decades. And that's how the queer community is. Loyalty is a big deal. We look for the folks not just who show up at a pride parade with their rainbow swag going on, but who in August are also sending amicus briefs to the Supreme Court on behalf of us for whatever issue is going on. And that's going to stick. And so I think true allyship are those who don't back down, who are the companies who say, you know what, our corporate value is, say, inclusivity. We're going to stand by it. Folks who are doing that right now, they're gonna succeed in the next three, five years. And those who aren't, we are going to remember.

**Shari Simpson:**

How have you addressed or talked to organizations? Because I've heard this before in my career. Something as simple as, hey, we can't afford, I'm using air quotes, we can't afford to create gender neutral bathrooms. Some of that stuff that seems like a no duh, we put in all these business reasons why we can't do it. What is your vibe on that one?

**Dr. Steve Yacovelli:**

So there are different ways you can show your inclusivity as a business, big and small. Sure. Okay. That might be a legit excuse. We don't have the physical infrastructure. Okay. But what else? Um, you know, I was just walking past the, um, the, the, um, you know, they have portable bathrooms, they have different things you can do. I mean, there's other ways, but you can do something small as, Hey, here's a corporate policy that allows you to put your pronouns in your email signature. I've had client partners who they weren't allowed to do that. And I'm like, why? How much does that cost? And it's an option thing. You can make it standard or not. But you can show inclusivity and allyship in big ways. And yeah, and then there's other ways. Let's figure out how we can use our employee network and our employee resource groups to help us solve those other solutions.

**Shari Simpson:**

What do you think are some of the most significant barriers that HR faces as they're trying to foster these more inclusive environments?

**Dr. Steve Yacovelli:**

I think it starts at the top. A lot of my direct client partners are HR professionals, executives, and what they tell me is they're like, I want to do this, but I'm getting pushback from those at the C-suite. where I have senior executives who just don't, quote unquote, I'm using air quotes now, buy into how inclusivity impacts our bottom line, even though the data is ridiculous. And so I think that's the biggest barrier, is that lack of seen and perceived executive sponsorship. And I actually approach inclusivity as a change management project. I was an IBMer for a while. working in change management. And so we say, just do the exact same process that you would do for a new software implementation. Yes, it's humans, but all the same steps that you do, including having visible executive sponsorship, that's what makes or breaks a change project. You're doing behavior change. It's kind of the same philosophy.

**Shari Simpson:**

Yeah, for sure. Have you run into scenarios where leadership has a hard time divorcing their personal beliefs into their corporate execution?

**Dr. Steve Yacovelli:**

And that's sadly common. And you see that just at various levels, people who are maybe longer tenure, you might have a different philosophy than people who are newer in their professional journey. What I tell every single client partner of mine is, what are your corporate values? And I have yet to find an organization that doesn't have something that points toward inclusivity, celebrate differences, whatever. And I say use those as a sword and a shield. Because that's the agreed upon way that every employee from top to bottom in the org chart are supposed to do the work. And if a senior executive, if a junior executive, if a whoever isn't going along and playing by those values, then that's an opportunity to have a conversation with them. Because they're not playing by the state of rules that every employee is supposed to be playing with.

**Shari Simpson:**

All right. I want to ask you kind of a complex question, and I didn't give it to you in advance. I didn't finish my coffee yet. But I think it's important. You know, as you look at the gamut of the queer community, right, it's not one thing. It's a diverse community in itself.

**Dr. Steve Yacovelli:**

Yes.

**Shari Simpson:**

And I've run into scenarios where people who are not part of the community will say things like, well, I don't know how to address a transgender person, or I don't know how to address somebody who is heterosexual, but they dress like a woman because it makes them feel good, and that's how they want to show up. How do we, as HR people, start to change the narrative that it's not like you need permission, right? Like, they're not requesting your permission to be themselves. It gets complicated.

**Dr. Steve Yacovelli:**

Yeah, and I think we as HR professionals and as workplaces have the opportunity to shape the culture. And so we can set those parameters on what is expected and not expected within the confines of our workplace culture. And so I think it's being very crystal clear. One of the things that I've been saying to a lot of folks is, Let's take it back to the bare bones. What is your feedback environment like in your workplace? And they're like, what? That's a standard leadership 101 thing. You should, as an organization, have some sort of state of way. It could be the EECC method. There's so many models out there that are just simple. But there are ways that we say, hey, when we provide feedback in a respectful way at this organization, here's what we do. And then you use that on top of whatever scenario fits about you. Hey, you mispronounced me five times. Then providing that effective feedback in a respectful way, that's the norm. But that's also holding each other accountable, i.e. back to the value system.

**Shari Simpson:**

I think that also can be true, just how you live your everyday life. I was at a conference much earlier this year and I was talking to this wonderful CEO and he was talking about this woman that I should have on the podcast. And he's like, she's an amazing woman founder. And I stopped him right there. I said, Hey, listen, I was like, she's not a woman founder. I'm like, she's a founder who happens to be a woman. And he was like,

**Dr. Steve Yacovelli:**

Oh my gosh, you're so right. I knew I could say that. I didn't know this person very well. But it's something very simple as that. We don't necessarily think how much language impacts things and the way we use it.

**Shari Simpson:**

I was creating a class for a client not too long ago, and it was on inclusive language. We had the pronoun thing in there, which of course I knew, and some other things. But as I started researching certain phrases, that we say in very very common language and the history of those and where they started I was like oh my gosh and I find myself correcting I was correcting an

HR executive yesterday and they're like and I said I'm sorry I don't mean to be like the HR police which I know we are always labeled as that all the time but I'm like I just wanted to share that with you and she's like I had no idea said I didn't either until maybe like six months ago as this white cisgender gay dude But it's just like, that's the fun thing. We're all in this together to learn. And like with your example, you maybe didn't know that person, but it sounds like you automatically had some semblance of trust. And that's what we can all do. What can we do to build that rapport and that trust so that when those hiccups happen, and they will happen to all of us, that we can say, hey, let me course correct you. Oh, thank you for that. Now I know. Let's move on.

**Dr. Steve Yacovelli:**

Yeah. Jason Sudeikis shared yesterday a little bit about Ted Lasso and that approach of like curiosity and like almost a little bit of dumbness to it, for lack of a better word. Yeah. Like, oh, oh, that word had it like. If we can bring more of that curiosity and just understanding, oh man, the impact we could have.

**Dr. Steve Yacovelli:**

I saw a meme or a cartoon or whatever, and it was this one person was talking to this person in a wheelchair, and they're like, how should I refer to you as a disabled? And they had all these words, and he's like, just Bob. And it really got to the root of it, didn't it? All my trans friends, they're just like, just use the name that I use. I'm like, yes, yes, let's do that. How hard is that? It costs nothing. And the respect can go super far. And the last thing I'll say is, I always remind people that diversity, everybody is diverse. And I even heard that yesterday, someone had made that comment, and I was like, no, every single human in your workplace is diverse. Even the whitest gender dudes, the left-handed people, the parents. I mean, I use the five layers of diversity by Garden Schwartz and Rowe as a way to explain to people, especially my people who aren't the quote unquote traditional diversity, in my inclusive leadership programs, and it really helps them feel included and seen that, oh my gosh, because I'm in sales versus someone in accounting, that can lend me looking at the world just a little bit differently.

**Shari Simpson:**

Yes, yes it does. And of course, there's bigger and smaller ways that we look at the world differently, like you being gay, I impact the world differently and look at the world than someone who's not, but that's okay. They all contribute to how we interact and experience, and if we honor those differences in everybody, we're going to win.

**Shari Simpson:**

Yeah. How have you coached leaders in your partnership with them that come to you and say, okay, I'm all in on allyship, I'm all in on inclusivity, but I need the data to show that these programs are working?

**Dr. Steve Yacovelli:**

Yeah. And that's a fair question. And I mean, especially as an external vendor, they often, and I actually want this because it justifies them buying my services. But I also find that organizations can get lazy with the measurement strategies when it comes to corporate learning, when it comes to inclusivity, when it comes to employee engagement. Yeah, you might get that one data point here and there, but I think smart organizations are looking at a holistic dashboard of the direct and indirect contributions to moving the needle for, say, an inclusive leadership program or whatever. And I think it's, if we're not asking this, do you feel that you belong to our employee base, we're missing a massive metric that we can go back and show that, oh, 98% of our people feel that they belong, fan-flippin-tastic. Or 12% feel that they belong, ooh, that's an opportunity. So I think it starts there, but it also takes money and resources. And I think some organizations just wanna look at, say, butts in seats, and that's not really how you measure true behavior change.

**Shari Simpson:**

Yeah. How have you, I like the metric around belonging. I think what's interesting as I've thought about and researched what Gen Z's priorities are, it's fascinating. I think it's going to completely revolutionize work in so many ways that we don't quite know yet because they don't want to have a BFF at work. They have their BFF outside of work. A work is a job. Yeah. And, and for, I'm also Gen X for, for me, it's a career, right? This is my, home at this

workplace. This is my life. This is my part of my identity. And it's not the same. Yes. How does that change some of those concepts around allyship and belonging and inclusivity?

**Dr. Steve Yacovelli:**

I love that you ask this question because I'm a data nerd as well. And I've been reading all these different studies that came out in the last year that really tell an interesting story and a different story than what's in the headlines. And case in point, I love the Gen Zers. They are going to flip our workplace on its head in a great way. 83% of them, according to one study, expect their company to do diversity, equity, inclusion work. And they won't go to that place. So right there alone, that one data point, if you're listing as an HR talent management person or whatever, you're not going to get the best talent if you're not having these types of things. And then looking at it through the rainbow lens, the queerness, I believe it's 28% of Gen Zers identify as queer. adults. So that's, that's higher than the 9% on the overall, which is, this is Gallup that just came out a couple months ago. And so those two data points alone, it's like, oh my gosh, if you're backing out of your pride events and you're kicking off, you're kicking out your DEI efforts, like you're, you're not doing yourself a service, especially in three years from now, what 2030 is when Gen Z will, will be a third of the workforce. It's like you have a third of the workforce that expects you, most of them expect you to do DEI and a third of them identify as queer. And that's just one facet of diversity that's out there. So, yeah, companies need to be paying attention to Gen Z. And if they're not, they are going to miss the boat very quickly.

**Shari Simpson:**

Well, and I like that you said earlier that the concept around, you know, rainbow fine June or like...

**Dr. Steve Yacovelli:**

Rainbow washing.

**Shari Simpson:**

Yeah. Or pink wash in October. Because if your organization is doing it right,



those shouldn't be the only moments that you're talking about different inclusion initiatives. One of the things that we've done over the years that I've really loved is that as, you know, there's these different celebratory months nationally, we kind of lean into it from a different perspective. Meaning we'll bring in a speaker, we'll offer food that's like aligned with that cultural expectation or those types of things. And we'll have real conversations about what that's like, and we'll help to teach about language and some of those things. And those are super low lift things, if you think about it from an HR perspective.

**Dr. Steve Yacovelli:**

Yeah, you know, it's one of the things I do a lot of keynotes, both in person and virtual. And yes, as the gay leadership dude, June is very busy. Typically, it was a little quieter this year, I got to admit, because people's budgets were a little weird. My three signature talks that I do are meant to be universal. So I'll have the LGBT employee resource group say, hey, we want to talk about that being a consciously inclusive leader program for our queer folks. I said, yes, and invite every other ERG. Because the strategies to be an inclusive queer leader are the same and to be as inclusive female leader, black leader, insert all of the differences here. And then we also couple that with, I really try to push them to do things in an intersectionality effort. So I had one group that they have a very new employee resource group that's young professionals, like fantastic way to focus on the Gen Zers. And they said, well, you know, but we want to partner with them as the LGBT employee resource group, because obviously we have young queer people in that group. And I said, fantastic, do a joint effort between your two ERGs. and I'll come in and talk about the six leadership competencies you should focus on. That's a universal thing. And it's really been fun to talk through these things like, for Black History Month, who are your queer black people that you want to have a chat about? And just really making it that, showing less of the, let's silo it in one month and say, oh, you know what? By the way, October is also LGBTQ plus history month. Let's have a chat there. And make the different ways of, I guess, allyship exposure be really obvious versus just that one summit.

**Shari Simpson:**

And that intersectionality piece, I think that's really where some of the inclusion conversations should focus on. Like you said, we've had these siloed initiatives. We're not siloed people, right? We're super complex.

**Dr. Steve Yacovelli:**

That's why I love that five layers of diversity model because it kind of shows that. And it goes everything into personality as the core of what makes every single human in the space unique. And that's true. I mean, you know, twins, they're not the same. So, you know, I think you're right. We are so complex and we are so intersectionality and, you know, you might be a parent. Well, you are a parent. I am not a parent. So that's a different experience that we have. I'm a canine parent. So that's a thing for me. And so, you know, left-handed people, I always give this example. I mean, gosh, in the 80s, I felt so bad for our left handed friends who were like creating their their left handedness on that right handed desk. But that was a way that it impacted their life. Yeah. And if we think about it through that lens and know that we are all going through these differences together, I think we'll we'll finally win this this race.

**Shari Simpson:**

Yeah, I love that. As we kind of wrap up our conversation, I'm curious how you've coached HR leaders to handle backlash or resistance internally. And I hate that we have to sit in this space, but sometimes we do. Sometimes we ourselves are not there yet. How have you coached people on that?

**Dr. Steve Yacovelli:**

I know I'm repeating myself, the values. I go back to the mission and vision, but most likely the corporate values. Because at the end of the day in the workplace, that's what we're supposed to do. Matter of fact, I'm a little rabble rouser on social media, I will say. Last summer, when it was the first of the Robbie Starbucks, who was harassing different companies, like the Lowe's and such, and they started pulling back, I started going to their websites, taking screenshots of their corporate values, and I would redline SharpieMarker, of course, virtually, where like, oh look, you have a corporate value of inclusivity,

yet you just did this. And I was posting it, and sadly, I got backlogged because there was too many of them. But it really made me sad that here's these companies who verbally say, or say in public, we value this, but then doing the opposite. And that's disheartening for me as an external person. I can only imagine as an HR professional inside what that looks like. I have a lot of friends who were really upset with Target, and I have a lot of friends who actually lost their jobs from Target. And I think we can learn from those experiences. I think at the end of the day, as an HR professional, you have your own personal values too. And if they align with not just what's stated values on your corporate website, but what's really lived, then that's great. If they're not, then that's kind of some soul-searching. But it's also having that hard conversation with the senior executives to say, look, we're living these values this way, but we're stating them this way. That's a disconnect, and people know it. And sending that alarm, and if nothing happens to it, or there's lack of movement, then maybe we have to try some other strategy or tactic.

**Shari Simpson:**

Yeah, and just like everything else, you know, as a fellow Gen Xer, we didn't have social media tracking all of our behavior and great choices that we had as teenagers. But that's not the case now. Even in our organizations, it's not the case. So, you know, you might think something is proprietary or, you know, but I mean, you just hop on TikTok and look at all the people who've recorded their terminations, you know, like very, very public. So it is a different environment we have to think of. As we wrap up our conversation and you look ahead to the future, right, how do you anticipate inclusion, specifically for the queer community, maybe changing or evolving and or influence?

**Dr. Steve Yacovelli:**

Yeah, well, we talked about the amount of Gen Zers, and I think that's going to be a massive push. For organizations to really take a notice and say, huh, how are we looking at our queer and also ally team members and figuring out how we're supporting them? I think as things progress in our society, who knows what direction it's going to be, I think it's companies having an opportunity to step up to the plate. As we saw with marriage equality and say, you know what, this is the right path we need to do regardless of how it might hit our

bottom line. Now I know that's very sensitive. And I mean, I have lost business this year because companies are saying, you know what, we need to pause that inclusive leadership program, Steve, that you bring to us. And I hear that and I get that, but so does all of your employees. And I think we need to be really mindful as HR professionals what messages we're sending by taking action or being silent. And I think that what we do now is going to impact how we're perceived in the future.

**Shari Simpson:**

Yeah, for sure. Well, Steve, such a great conversation. Thank you.

**Dr. Steve Yacovelli:**

Thank you for the opportunity. Have a great conference.

**Shari Simpson:**

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