

HR Mixtape podcast | Hosted by Dr. Shari Simpson | Guest: Steve Jaffe, Author, Jaffe Marketing and Publishing

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.

Dr. Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Steve Jaffe, author at Jaffe Marketing and Publishing. Steve focuses on the real emotional and practical impact of layoffs and how people can rebuild with clarity and resilience. Steve, thanks for jumping on the podcast with me today.

Steve Jaffe: Thanks so much for having me. I really appreciate it.

Dr. Shari Simpson: So you have a really interesting story that we're going to talk about in the space of laying off people. And it's not a job that we like to do in HR, but it is required of us. I'd like to start maybe with this question. When you think back to your experience, what's the feeling or what do you remember most about that moment right after layoff that really shaped your perspective that you have now?

Steve Jaffe: Oh, gosh. So the book that I wrote, *The Layoff Journey*, is about that experience. It's about the journey of my very first layoff in the spring of 2001. And then my last layoff, which was my fourth layoff, in the summer of 2023. And there was a very big difference in how I handled the first layoff compared to the fourth one. The first layoff, it took me years to recover, literally. I was just stuck. I kept questioning, what did I do wrong? Why me? I took it as a declaration on my self-worth, my identity, my level of intelligence. I put all kinds of weight into the reason I was laid off. It was nothing more than a simple budget exercise by the company, but I put so much more into it. By the time I was laid off on the fourth time, it was like water off a duck's back. It didn't really bother me that much. I understood that it was a budget exercise and didn't give it any more oxygen than that. And the impetus for this book is that I hope if somebody reads it, they'll be able to process their layoff in months rather than years. So they'll take my 10,000 hours of experience

grieving job loss and take the roadmap that I learned and that I found helpful and be able to apply it and have it be helpful for them. So layoffs are very difficult. I framed this journey in the stages of grief, not dissimilar to the Elizabeth Kubler-Ross stages of grief, when the death of a loved one or a divorce, this is a traumatic experience just like that. And people will face the stages of grief, and it's important to have a roadmap and some guidelines that you can use to understand how to get through it. Yeah, I mean, I went through those stages of grief for sure. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression. Those were four tough ones. And then on the other side of that, you end up in acceptance and renewal and recovery. And you find maybe some type of, I don't want to say silver lining because layoffs suck, but you do find that you can come out of it feeling maybe a bit hopeful and finding some resilience and some tenacity, you know, it definitely will transform you.

Dr. Shari Simpson: Yeah, you know, I learned this lesson as an HR practitioner when it comes to kind of the humanity that you have to remember in these moments. And when you're younger in your HR career, at least for me, you know, you get taught kind of like the tactical language to use to walk through a termination or layoff. You didn't get taught the humanity of the conversation. And I'll tell you, I made those mistakes early on when I had to do terminations, and I was very matter-of-fact and non-emotional, and, you know, like, this is just very business. But the reality is, what you shared in just that little bit, it's like, there is a very, very real human impact that leaders tend to underestimate. What have you seen out of that?

Steve Jaffe: Oh my gosh, great point. I'm doing a presentation next week to the Northern California Human Resources Society, and there are things like an increase in heart disease, diabetes, alcohol and drug use, suicide and self-harm, obesity, depression, all of these things increase after a layoff. And there's a reason for that because people are going through something that they may not have the skills necessary to cope with. And so they might be turning to maybe unhealthy ways. But after a layoff, and I want to draw a definition between a layoff and a termination. Layoff being no fault termination due to a budget exercise and contraction by the company versus if you get fired, it's probably because you did something wrong. I'm coming at

this from the perspective of a layoff where you've had your position eliminated for something to do with the company's budget and they need to redirect expenses to the bottom line. Because that's what's really difficult to come to terms with. Why me? What did I do wrong? And it's just merely a budget exercise.

Dr. Shari Simpson: You know, when I think of that distinction and kind of what you shared, I know how I would feel. I would be going through some of the same questioning that you talked about, especially because you don't necessarily get the peek behind the curtain as to how the decisions were made. And so, yeah, budget exercise, but how did they decide where to apply that exercise? And so you talked about it a little bit already, but you had to go through this process of kind of rebuilding your internal identity and confidence. Where do you start with that? And I guess, do you allow some time to sit and wallow before you start that?

Steve Jaffe: I would just rephrase, absolutely take time to process this grief. If you process this grief, you'll only be more successful when you show up for that job interview and that hiring manager says, tell me about yourself, tell me why you left your last job, and you have to kind of face that elephant in the room of, well, I was laid off, and you have to answer that question in a really simple way. Processing this grief, getting through the denial and the anger and the depression will position you for success. What you need to do is separate your identity from that job, that title and that company that you're working for, that's not who you are. That's what you did. You need to focus on your transferable skills that you take with you wherever you go, that no company can take away from you. So, you know, rather than getting focused on, let's say I was a vice president of marketing for Kellogg's, you know, rather than that, you know, I have 25 years of market experience for consumer packaged good products, and I'm really passionate about the customer experience, right? That tells somebody about myself, about my experience, about like, what my passion is and what I bring to the table, absent any job title or company. And owning what you bring to the table and not getting hung up on the layoff and the whys. The important thing is, it's really easy when you get laid off to ask, why me? Why now? What did I do

wrong? What could I have done better, different? All those questions, you're never going to get answered. If you can turn that question around and just look forward, and instead of saying what happened, say what's next. Use this as, it's not a roadblock, it's merely a detour, and process the grief in a way that helps you find your way forward.

Dr. Shari Simpson: With this book, have you found, as you've talked to people about your own story, that there's any difference between how men and women handle this? And the reason I ask that question is because so many times we have conversations about men really building their identity inside of a job. Differently than women do. Now, obviously, I'm making very general statements here, but it is something I've seen in my career. Has that been something that you've seen or as you've talked through this, you've seen it manifest in different ways?

Steve Jaffe: Great question. I think, generally speaking, the layoffs and the stages of grief are somewhat universal across gender. Now, the difference being not everyone experiences all of them the same way. The question I get asked mostly when I talk about the book is, what stage of grief do I think most people get hung up on? And I think it's unique to each individual. For me, I got hung up on the stage of depression, right? But for somebody else, they may get hung up on anger or denial. I think based on your life experience and perhaps your gender, you may experience the stages of grief differently. But I think you're right that men may tend to put a little bit more weight into what they do and tend to have a more singular definition of their identity, where women may be a little bit more well-rounded. I do think women probably have a much better support network than men do, which is really key when you get laid off to have people that you can turn to, you can talk about it with, that you can share the experience with, that will help prop you up, right? But there's probably pros and cons for each gender following a layoff. I wouldn't wish a layoff on anyone, but yeah, I think that nobody is immune to the pain.

Dr. Shari Simpson: Oh, for sure. What do you think HR needs to do to support layoffs in a way that's, you know, I guess dignified and practical? And I think about this from the perspective of, you know, obviously don't do, going

back to my example of, you know, very, very, like, dry, to the point, here's your details, right? Then there's something in the middle that's more compassionate and dignified. And then there's probably best in class, right? Maybe you could answer, like, what's the dignified way? And then what's best in class that you've seen? Like, man, if everybody could do it this way, this would be the way to do it.

Steve Jaffe: Yeah, yeah. I think grounding the experience in humanity, in compassion, in empathy, in dignity, if that is your mission and your end goal, you probably will not go wrong. I think best in class looks like this. If you have a child and your child comes home and says, I just got laid off from work today, and you're thinking, oh my gosh, and you ask them, how did that go? What was that experience like? What would you like them to tell you about that experience? You would like there to be honesty and candid candor. You would like there to be a fair severance package with fair compensation and health insurance. You would like them to be told or notified in a compassionate way. So if you think about this in those terms, how would you want your child to be laid off? And you structure the layoff conversation and everything around it in that way, you probably won't go wrong. You'll probably meet that goal of humanity and compassion and empathy. A layoff tells employees and those that left, two different messages. It tells the ones that laid off one thing, the ones that stay, it also communicates to them, right? Because they feel, one, they feel survival-skilled, but they also feel, well, are they going to come for me? What's next? And all of these things affect the company's ability for rehiring, for alumni referrals. Usually you'll end up with something on a glass door board. You may open yourself up to legal liability. The issue is, I think, human resources approaches this from a legal standpoint, right? And from a standpoint of, okay, we're gonna sever our ties with this employee, we're gonna give them a severance agreement, we're gonna get their equipment back, and that's gonna be the end of it, and they wash their hands. But going back to what I said earlier, for the employer, the journey is over with. For the employee, the journey has just begun, right? And now they're dealing with all of those health ramifications mentally, physically, and they're gonna be on the job market for quite a while before they land their next job. So taking care of them is important. The truest display of a

company's culture is how they lay people off. People talk about company culture a lot. And sometimes it's lip service, sometimes it's a foosball table and a happy hour on Friday. Truly, the way a company shows up and communicates and treats their employees in the time that they need it most, that's when great companies are defined.

Dr. Shari Simpson: Yeah. And as you were talking, I was thinking about, you know, some of the resources that HR can consider in that package, right? So severance, great. Compensation-wise, fine. Check the box there. But there are things like, hey, we're going to give you access to resume writing, review services. We're going to give you access to interview questions and people who can help you interview prep or job searching or mental health resources, right? We're going to extend your access to EAP for several months. Like, we can get creative. And I really like your perspective of, you know, if I, if a child, if a loved one, if somebody that's really close to me is experiencing this, what would I want the organization to do? I think that's very good. And if you didn't catch it, listeners, you already made the business case for us, right? Because that's kind of what we have to go back to as HR professionals when we're like, pitching, hey, we wanna spend this money this way during this layoff process, we can talk about the ROI of a human layoff and the impact it's gonna potentially have to us on things like Glassdoor and Reddit and some of the other very public ways, TikTok and videos and all the things, right? A lot of these things are now being recorded kind of behind our backs and there's a real reality that it's gonna get out there. And so how you show up isn't just squishy, you know, it is very much a very business driven perspective. How have you thought about the use of things like local community and networks that people can tap into when they're having these experiences that you've experienced?

Steve Jaffe: Incredibly important. The first layoff that I got laid off in 2001, there was no support system. There was no internet, there weren't community boards, there was no support. There is a lot of support that people can find now. I recommend everyone take advantage of it. There's great communities on Substack and Discord. On LinkedIn, there's great outplacement agencies that are helping people. Of course, my book is a great resource as well. But

here's the thing. Your ability to network is really important after a layoff. The hidden job market is real. People are applying to jobs now where there's like a thousand applicants. Your resume is getting screened out by an ATS system, it's really difficult to get your resume to the top of that inbox. Your network probably is gonna be the way that you're gonna find your next job. So what that means is, a lot of times people who are laid off experience some real shame and embarrassment, and they're afraid to talk about it, and they're afraid to reach out to others. In my book, I mentioned that about 40% of all Americans have been laid off at least once. We probably all know somebody in our network that's been laid off, but nobody's really talking about it because there's that shame and embarrassment. When you start talking about it, you open up those resources. You open up the opportunity for somebody to share their experience with you and share their network with you. So it's important to have that open conversation and really reach out. This is when that network that you've built comes into play. This is like that break glass in case of emergency. This is the emergency to tap into that network.

Dr. Shari Simpson: Well, and the reality is we, as humans, I think, create a lot of stories for ourselves because I can tell you if anybody in my network said, hey, I was laid off. Do you have resources? Do you know of people hiring? My first instinct wouldn't be like, what happened? What'd you do? Like, it would never even cross my mind to be like, well, you experienced something because your business changed. And so you're right. There is no shame in that. But we like to give ourselves a lot of shame as humans in general. You know, what is the one thing you think, if somebody is going through this right now, they came across the podcast, they're getting advice, besides grabbing your book, obviously, what's, you know, one thing they should do in the next 30 days?

Steve Jaffe: Oh, gosh. One of the first things you should do is take a look at your finances and make sure you've got enough runway, understand where you are financially. Once you have that, it'll give you some peace of mind to address all these other things, to address the denial, the anger, the bargaining, the depression, to be able to face the renewal and how you come out of this in a better position. Get the finances out of the way first, right? Give

yourself a minute to sit with what you're going through and allow yourself the time to grieve. Give yourself that permission to say, this is a really difficult thing and this really sucks. Something has been taken from me. And it's more than just my paycheck. It might be my health care. If I'm an immigrant, it might be my visa. My community, those people that I work with every day that are my friends, right? My routine, what I go and do that brings me joy, that's my passion, that gives me fulfillment. These are all things that have been taken, and it's going to take time to recover from that. And don't rush that, right? Certainly reach out to your network, and don't rush to go right into the job interviews and the resumes. Give yourself some time to sit with it. It's really important. And know that you're not alone. That, like I said, 40% of all Americans have been laid off. There were more layoffs this past January than since 2009. Layoffs are becoming much more common than they've ever been, unfortunately. There are a lot of people that are experiencing this, so you're not alone.

Dr. Shari Simpson: That's such good advice, Steve. And I appreciate you being willing to share your story and document it and share it with other people, both from those going through it and those in my world, in the practitioner space, where we can learn a lot from what you've experienced so that we can do it better. So thanks for taking the time to sit with me and have this important conversation.

Steve Jaffe: Thanks so much for having me on. I appreciate it. Thank you for listening and opening up your network for me to talk about the book and my experience.

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