

HR Mixtape | Hosted by Dr. Shari Simpson | Guest: Claude Silver, Chief Heart Officer, VaynerX

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 Claude Silver, Chief Heart Officer at VaynerX. Claude helps leaders build human-centered cultures where people can show up fully and still deliver high performance.

Claude Silver: Thank you so much. It's the greatest title in rock and roll, and it's more, as you know, it's more than the title. It's just the embodiment of what I truly believe in, which at its essence is servant leadership. I don't use the word servant leadership. I use empathetic leadership or heart-based leadership. For me, being able to be both use my emotional intelligence skills and be emotionally fluent and understand how to act is something that is very near and dear to me and something that I really do my best to kind of blanket our organization with because those are not easy things to do. It's one thing to be aware of your feelings, which already is a whole, you know, kit and caboodle, but then to know how to speak. feeling is a whole other thing. And so I've always been that kind of player-coach-captain. Doesn't matter, you know, if I was on the tennis team or soccer team. I love believing in people. I do. I believe in people. I believe in possibility. It took me a longer time to believe in my own self, which is sometimes the course that it takes. And so leading with heart for me is a no-brainer. Why wouldn't I want the best for you? Why wouldn't I try to make space for you? Why wouldn't I want you to feel safe with me and for me to feel safe with you and belong? Those things to me feel like very common sense. I know it's not always common sense. You know, belonging is such a buzzword now, but it is so difficult to find. If you can find it within yourself, I believe you can find it externally. But we know that that's not always easy, especially for people that have different lived experience and they're different ages and whatnot. Creating a place where

people feel psychologically, physically safe and that they can find places within to belong is really what I'm incredibly passionate about and all the while helping them get from good to great and great to exceptional.

Shari Simpson: How have you helped bring this to your own leadership team? Because I think about the leaders I've worked with over the years, and there have been many conversations I've had where we've talked about empathy, empowerment, authenticity, transparency, and they just bucket it in this weird, squishy feelings category and have a really hard time connecting it to business outcomes.

Claude Silver: Yeah, I mean, this is what I say when someone says to me, well, what's the ROI of leading with heart? What's the ROI of being a good person? What's the ROI? It's like, what's not the ROI? What is not the ROI? If you need us to be quantitative about it, low attrition, incredibly high retention rates with our high performers. word-of-mouth referrals from those high performers so that our recruiting fees are lower. You know, more innovation, more creativity, more longevity, more connectivity. These are things that I believe are necessary in today's day and age, especially the longevity and especially the connectivity because you're not starting from square one every day. every day. You're like, you've been together. You understand. Now you gel together. You learn by osmosis. And yes, people still think they're warm and fuzzy skills, but they're not. They're very hard skills. They're very hard skills to master if that's not where you come from, and that's an expectation. Or you're a leader, and yes, we expect you to be kind, compassionate, understanding, and vulnerable. Like, people are like, huh? I don't think so. But that's a behavior that we expect here. I'll say actually the core behaviors that we look for and that we actually review people on are communication, accountability, growth mindset, and leadership. And so no matter where you are on that ladder, those are your responsible behaviors to really start to own and learn and use consistently.

Shari Simpson: Well, and so much of that starts with building psychological safety. And I think that term can get confusing. I think people have defined it in a bunch of different ways. I want to share one little story that you had in the

book that I think really hit the mark for me as I was listening to it. And you were talking about being in a meeting with Gary and Gary had kind of unleashed on you in this meeting. And then the follow-up conversation from that. And, you know, as I was reading it, I was thinking, wow, like, they have the psychological safety with each other that they feel like they can speak to each other in a certain familiar way. But also your journey of being able to have the psychological safety to go back and be like, Hey, fam, that actually wasn't it. That wasn't the moment. That wasn't the vibe. How do we build that kind of collaboration between each other?

Claude Silver: Well, obviously, it takes trust, and that is something that is built. You can't just say, hey, stranger, I'm going to work with you now, and now I trust you forever. So it's how willing is each party willing to remove some of their armor and to show you a little bit more of who they are as a person? whether or not that's I got engaged over the weekend or my kids spilled Cheerios all over the floor and I was an hour late to work or I really had a terrible review and I'm feeling a little wobbly right now. Like the more we can be real The more we can be real and rather than having this facade up and like, oh, I got it all together. No one has it all together. The more we can do that, I believe that the more safety we can create with each other, because then you know my blood is red just like your blood. And so getting away from difference and coming together more as similar creatures, right, that have very different lived experience, but we have very similar motives. we have similar values, or you wouldn't be here. And so building those bridges takes time, it takes consistency, reliability, and it obviously takes an enormous amount of transparent communication. These are not hard things, they're just challenging for some people. And that's what it takes. And so when Gary said to me early on, which I talk about in the book, you know, you don't trust me yet. You're 98% in, but you're not 100%. He was right. He was really right. He felt it, and he was right. And I can remember the time where I finally did drop in, and I was like, I'm here. You got me. And it was a whole different ballgame. Even though it was just a tiny bit, I had an inch more. That inch meant something.

Shari Simpson: How do you think leaders are slowly degrading that trust, and how do they go about repairing it? Because we've all been in those scenarios, I think, where we've worked really hard to get to a point, and then we just, we make a bad choice, we do something that breaks that trust, and then we have to kind of start over again.

Claude Silver: Yeah, I think it really, it's leaders, but it's human beings working on a team together, understanding that we have choice. We have a choice on how we're gonna react. when something happens? Are we going to show our frustration? Are we going to show our resentment and our anger and our fear as a leader? Are we going to admit that we have feelings, but we're not going to spill it everywhere? I mean, it really takes an enormous amount of awareness and a willingness to be this type of leader that believes in other people. You know, empathy, it's a very overused buzzword right now. And for me, empathy is being a passenger with someone. It's not being in your shoes. I could never be in your shoes. We have different lived experience. But through empathy and understanding that you too go through things in your life, I too go through things, I think that should be able to level the playing field. And that is where we need, I believe, that is where we need to start, which is there's not a whole lot difference here. What happens now is I'm a leader. I have all the answers and I will get the win. Well, no, you're a leader and being a leader means you work for them. You lead with love. You don't pound your chest because you're a leader. For me, no one works for me. I work for and with the 2,000 people, and I like it like that. I don't need to be on the front stage saying, like, this is my kingdom. you know, that's not important to me. And it is important to other people, I think, especially when they themselves are trying to fill a hole inside and get recognized and get noticed. And that's when the politics come in and all of that stuff. So, you know, there's a lot to remember when you're a leader. There really is. And then at some point, just like going to the gym, you exercise it enough, and it's not anything you really need to think about. You know how to create safety. You know how to make eye contact and show that you're active listening. You know these things, but it does take practice and a willingness.

Shari Simpson: I like that you mentioned practice, and I really liked that that was one aspect of your book. In all of your chapters, you give some really great tactical takeaways for the leader to start practicing some of these concepts that you talk about. You know, I'm curious, how does this translate, you know, tactically to the business of HR? I'm thinking performance reviews, competency models. You know, when you're dealing with people who potentially you have to have a performance improvement plan conversation, how does that come to life there?

Claude Silver: Yeah, I mean, first and foremost, that's the reality, right? The reality is not everyone is going to be the highest performer or top talent for a number of reasons. There are going to be people that come in and they're neurodivergent and they might need special accommodations, which should not be a penalty, by the way. So we have core competencies and we have foundational and functional core competencies that everyone is reviewed on. The same exact, it just depends on where you are in the system. That's the first thing. We use peer feedback regularly as well as quarterly reviews with your manager or your boss. The peer feedback is very helpful because then you're really getting it from your team. We spend a lot of time on teaching and training how to write feedback, how to deliver feedback, how to receive feedback, and those are all challenging things for us human beings. You know, there are ways I think that if we can consistently be kind and clear and specific, and we can be current and helpful, actionable, you know, we can get it across the line. But I've read many tips that are not in the English I speak. I don't understand it. And I'm like, that is very cryptic to me. I don't know how anyone would get through that. Like, how are they going to win? How are they going to win on that? And so, you know, that's that. So going back to, you know, H.R. and reviews and talent planning, we have to be willing to have these honest conversations. And I think we also need to raise our hand and say, you know what, this is my subjective opinion. I've been working with Fred for five months now. This is what I see. This person says, I've been working with Fred for three months on this particular thing, and this is what I see. OK, there's no right or wrong, but we do need to get to a consensus so we can also help grow and develop this person or help them find a place that's right for them.

Shari Simpson: Well, and I suspect having this approach, I know this is true for my experience, and I'd love for you to share it because I think more people need to hear this, is that when we take that approach, there's this fear in the back of our heads, I think, in HR that we've been taught. Which I don't think is accurate, is that you're setting yourself up for legal problems. You're going to get sued. Like, it's inevitable if you bring humanity into the conversation that, you know, you're increasing risk. That has not been my experience. Has that been your experience?

Claude Silver: Not at all. You're increasing your risk if you want to talk about that person's personality and if they need a therapist. I mean, you know, crossing lines. But having an honest conversation, heart-to-heart, person-to-person, crosses no lines. If you are going into that conversation with the right intent and also being aware of the impact that your words are making, right? Because the way I'm saying something lands in your ears one way and it's going to land in that person's ears a different way just because of who you all are. That's the consciousness that we need, the mindfulness. Getting away from the bureaucracy and the HR being in protection land, reactive, you know, oh, let me, I don't want to get sued. What do you know? It's I don't think it's an everyday thing where we're getting sued these days, at least in the companies that I'm aware of.

Shari Simpson: How have you, you talked a little bit about quarterly reviews, and I love that approach. I think that I've worked in organizations that have done that very well, and ones that have done it from a very heavy process standpoint, and you're like, what are we getting out of this? But I'm curious, as you think about that mechanism of feedback and then listening to your employees, if you have that quarterly feedback for performance, how are you gathering kind of your engagement information? Because I suspect you're not doing just a one-time engagement survey annually.

Claude Silver: No, no, no. We do pulse surveys quarterly. And some of the offices, they do it monthly. And some of the smaller offices, which I actually think is great. So we do the pulse surveys. We do a lot of high-touch one-on-ones. There's a lot of accessibility and availability to all kinds of leaders.

Obviously, my role here is completely to scale Gary, to scale empathy, to figure out how to create safety and trust throughout every single office and really have people know, like, it's good here. And we will work very hard to solve any problem, any challenge. with the exception of someone's health, we can move you to another team. We can put you on a different department because you're showing and flexing strategy skills rather than project management skills. We can do all of these things. We're an independently owned agency, so we have a lot of liberty. And part of being owned by Gary Vaynerchuk, who's an entrepreneur, is there's a lot of autonomy here. a lot of autonomy. There is not a lot of micromanagement. There was, there was at a time, and I think that's something that we've really been able to move on by being honest about behavior and what we call kind candor. So it's one thing to be kind, but we don't want to coddle. We don't want to create entitlement. And it's easy to slip into that. So how do you be really kind and show up and remember that I connect with this person all the time. And I have to be honest with you, like your behavior is becoming a vulnerability for you here. You know, what are we going to do about that? What are you going to do about that now?

Shari Simpson: Well, and we all know clarity is kindness, and we forget that so much. We get stuck in this corporate speak, as I would call it. You know, nothing's worse than receiving feedback or, you know, requests in an email, and you're like, okay, I just got the corporate line again on my request, and there was no humanity in that response. So, I mean, you're so right that bringing that level of transparency and kindness into our conversation doesn't mean we aren't having hard conversations. We're still having the hard conversations.

Claude Silver: A thousand and one percent. A thousand and one percent. And my hope is that the people having those hard conversations are aware of what is coming out of their mouth and how it's coming out. Again, we don't want to harm anyone here. We don't want to hurt anyone here. We're not in that business. We want to give you enough of our subjective observation or listen, these are the steps to get promoted. We want to be honest about that. We want people to grow and develop. If you don't, then it's not the right place for you because then you're coming from an I rather than a we mentality.

Shari Simpson: For sure. As you went through this transition and really embracing this concept, what was one big mistake you think you made that you would hope our listeners don't make along the way?

Claude Silver: I mean, a thousand and one mistakes. I think I've definitely been in the mistake camp of coddling too much and not being honest. This is pre-COVID for sure, and not having the hard conversations when they just needed to. They just needed to be had because we ended up just like prolonging the ambiguity for a person, which is not right. And I have definitely been guilty of that. I think there's times in which I have used email when I need to use a phone call for a large group or a video call. That was pre-COVID as well, where you just pick up the phone and say, hey, team, I need five minutes. It's going to be very quick, but I need to say something rather than write it. out because you can hear my voice and my intonation. I would say those are two biggies that I have done repetitively and learned the hard way. Like, that's not what I can do here. But I would say on the other side is really doing my best to lead with a generous heart, lead with generosity, and make sure that I am making time for anyone that wants the time, not spending too much time on people that I know are on PIPs or the way out, but spending time on those people that really, they are the little engine that could, they really can get there. They need some support.

Shari Simpson: I love that you mentioned that because so many times our top performers actually don't get the time. Exactly. They get kind of, oh, they're fine. I mean, not that I was, not that I'm beating my chest. I never, ever got anything when I was on the floor as a strategist. Nothing. And I needed a lot

of help. You know, but I was always told I was an HR person's dream, and I was like, wow, well, I could have really used a spell checker early on. I could have used Grammarly. I could have used someone to give me a review, you know, but...

Shari Simpson: As you think about, you know, how work is changing and the things that we're seeing out of technology and, you know, advancement, what are the leadership skills that you think we should be training our leaders on right now to be successful in the future?

Claude Silver: Yeah, right now, communication skills, transparent communication skills, and listening skills, which I think are very unanimous. Listening, and I also think that it's extremely important, and I've said it a few times in this conversation, to be aware of what, how you are expressing your emotion inside. Where none of us are perfect, but we have that option to say, I'm gonna just do it, let me take it, let me take it, I'll do it, right? Listen, I don't have a lot of time to walk you through this, but let's find 15 minutes later on today and I'll show you what I want you to do. They're just simple things like that, but everything is rush, rush, rush, rush. So we as humans, technology is going faster than the speed of light. We as humans can calibrate. And remember that not everything is urgent. This ASAP is You know, is it really urgent? Is it really as soon as possible? No, I'll get it to you by Friday end of day. It's very different.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. I had a leader once who told me, hey, just so you know, if you text me, I will not respond for 10 minutes. And I was like. Oh, okay, I don't super like that. And her comment was, most people who text me with these urgent requests and when I don't respond in that 10 minutes, by the time I get to the text, they've already solved their own problem. And I was like, oh, what a good point. You know, Claude, as we wrap up our conversation, what's one heart-led action that you think our listeners can take today to bring into their next one-on-one to really show up in the way that you've talked about?

Claude Silver: Yeah, I'll give you two actually. The first one is you can easily slack that next one-on-one who you have tomorrow and say, I'm looking forward to chatting. Can't wait to hear what you've been up to. Something like that. You can reach out and just like, you know, create a runway for that person. And I think the other thing that you can do is be prepared. What are you going to talk about? Are you expecting that person to come in and do a show and tell? Have you guys talked about it?

Shari Simpson: I love that. Such good advice. Claude, this was such a great conversation. Again, to the listeners, make sure you pick up her book. It was fantastic. Really, really inspiring and a conversation I think a lot of leaders need to hear right now. So thanks again.

Claude Silver: Thank you so much.

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.