

The HR Mixtape: Episode with Shari Simpson and Dave Garrison, Co-Founder of Garrison Growth

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 Dave Garrison, co-founder from Garrison Growth. Dave is a market-facing growth leader with 25 years across the US, Canada, and Latin America, known for building high-performing teams and practical go-to-market playbooks that put customer value at the center. Dave, welcome to the podcast.

Dave Garrison:

Thank you. I'm excited to be here.

Shari Simpson:

So I want to start with you sharing a little bit with our audience about your book and your journey and how you really got into this space that you live and thrive in right now.

Dave Garrison:

Yes. You know, I had the opportunity to be a CEO in public and private companies for over 25 years and also sit on the boards of some amazing growth stories like TD Ameritrade where I was lead outside director and sit on the boards of companies that failed miserably and learn the same amount from both, just different lessons. And I've read so many books where it's like, this is how I did it. This is not one of those books, because you can't do what I did, nor would you want to, frankly. I have much more insight now than I did in

those decades as CEO. But what I was really curious about is what makes the difference between organizations that are what we call occasional winners and those that are game changers. And what we found is it's usually about the leaders. Because you can take, give me a B or a C strategy and give me an A set of leaders, and I can run rings around an A strategy all day long. But we are, as leaders, frankly, the only model we really have of leadership is from two places. One, what we learned from the people we've worked for in the past, and two, that which we learn in grade school. And in grade school, we learn there is a teacher. That teacher has the answer. There is one right answer. Nothing can be further from the truth. So if the leader believes their job is to give the right answer, then they've already lost the race. And so this book was really collecting stories from those leaders who inspire people to give it their all. And so just imagine. It's Friday night, you're at a high school football game. Can you feel the energy in the stands? Those are everyday people who have everyday jobs. What happened on Monday when they go back to work? Where did all that energy go? How come they're showing up and saying, uh-huh, sure, what would you like me to do? Appreciate the cupcakes, thanks. Where did all that energy go? This book is about how leaders inspire people to give their all.

Shari Simpson:

I love that. You know, I am a huge proponent of there's not one way to get to the end results that, you know, everybody brings to the table, their unique skills and experiences. I am a wired curiosity person, so I ask a lot of questions to deduce, you know, what is the actual problem we're trying to solve? And I also use that when somebody gives me an answer, a direction that I don't quite understand or align with, I get real curious about it. Like, hey, help explain to me where you got to that decision, or walk me through the lens that you used, because you all bring unique experiences. So I think that ties in really well into this idea of a culturally intelligent team. Maybe you could define that a little bit for our audience, what that means.

Dave Garrison:

Absolutely. Your example brought up a couple of important points in the book. We have one chapter that's called, you know, basically leaders ask questions,

leaders listen, don't tell. And it doesn't mean you don't have an opinion. It means you don't learn when you give the opinion. And one of the principles we talk about for leaders in the book is curiosity and judgment cannot coexist. If you're waiting to react to whatever I tell you, you can't be listening and you can't be curious. And so one of the things that we do when we work with leaders in person with our team is we have them repeat what they heard. And the way the brain works, we often translate what we heard into our language, not what the person said. Therefore, we can't get curious because we really don't know what they said. And so, another principle that's based on this idea that all of us are smarter than any of us is, when we make decisions like you said, let's identify the one specific problem we're addressing. Because when we run into a challenge, it's usually a cluster of problems. So let's select one and then don't go to solutions. Because what we're trained to do is, well, I've got an idea. No, I've got an idea. And then we debate ideas. Total waste of time. We talked about a process in the book called collective genius. And in the collective genius process, what it says is after we identify the single problem, then we ask, what would a great solution look like? And what I'm trying to find out is, what's on the checklist in your head that lets you know a solution is great? Because until we do that, we're going to leap right into debate where about my idea is better because blah, blah, blah. Don't waste any time on that. In fact, when we have employees and teams doing drama-free problem solving, they don't debate. Zero, none, discussion, almost none, because we gather and align on what great looks like, what the criteria is, what's the checklist, and then everybody is free to come up with solutions based on the same criteria and solving for the same problem. And one of the things we observe, I've done it, I'm guilty. I will read something or see something and come up with a great idea for my company and I come in on Monday morning and I go, hey team, I've got a great idea, why don't we? And it's done with love and the best of intentions and it is a disaster for generating buy-in because I've already told them it's a great idea. Here's an alternative. Take the effort to ask yourself what problem is being addressed, what lets me know it's a great idea and just share only that much and then ask others to take a day and think about their great ideas and then get all the great ideas

on the table. I find when you do that, ego gets detached from the idea and we can choose from great ideas collectively.

Shari Simpson:

I've definitely been on the receiving side of leadership coming in with a, I'm using air quotes here, but great big idea that ends up being kind of a terrible idea for the employee population or the way they thought it was going to get executed means that the team has to do double the workload to execute it the way that the leader thought. So I love that tactic of coming up with that checklist criteria of what does great look like because then you are kind of playing from the same tools as you have that thought exercise to come up with those great ideas. Such a great place to start. How do you, as an HR leader, as a hiring manager, how do you think differently about hiring when you're trying to build these teams that you want to have this sort of really unique type of collaboration?

Dave Garrison:

Yeah, so hiring generally and promotions generally have been done on in the hiring case. We need someone who has five to seven years experience twiddling their thumbs or whatever it is, and it's all well intentioned. That's all great and good, but it doesn't help you predict who's going to stay in the organization, who will step and what their contributions will look like. So we would suggest that, and one of the things in the Buy an Advantage book is use your compelling purpose, which is a simple statement that describes why it's worth doing. How is this organization changing the world? Four to six words, it's of the heart, talks about people, why it matters. After you come up with that compelling purpose, use it in the interview and say, you know what? Our compelling purpose is, if it was Walt Disney, creating happiness. How does that resonate for you? How do you think about that? How do you see yourself in that? So one, align on compelling purpose. Two, align on values. If one of your values is integrity, and I hope you only have two or three values and the values have at least a sentence to describe them, but assume it was integrity, don't ask, don't say, hey, our value is integrity, is that important to you? Because the answer is yes, of course it is. Instead ask, can you tell me about a time you've been challenged at work and your integrity has been

challenged? What happened? How did you deal with it? And find out about their relationship with integrity. And those answers on how they see themselves in the compelling purpose and how they relate to your values will help predict.

Shari Simpson:

When you think about organizations that are in different countries and they're trying to meld the complexities of different cultural experiences, different ways of speaking that are influenced by culture, you know, there are some cultures that you don't kind of question the boss. You don't have that sort of curiosity conversation. How do we create this in these organizations that have these multicultural, multi-country complexities?

Dave Garrison:

I've been blessed with having been CEO of organizations with operations in 55 countries. I have learned that things like commission plans, if you try to apply one commission plan, that's a disaster for cultural reasons, but also conversations. So let's take Asia. Um, let's take North Asia as an example of day and night different from how you'd have the conversation in New Jersey. Like, okay, let's start. So it's just putting the language. The onus becomes on the leader, particularly the Western leader in using the language where you are. And I don't mean literally the language Japanese. I mean, using the approach to language. So for example, indirect questions, if one were to have other ideas, what might those other ideas be? If you were to tell someone else what a great idea might look like, what might you tell them? So using the indirect non-confrontational is a leader's opportunity and obligation in order to get the best thinking from the team. The other thing that I recognize in North Asian cultures is to allow them to collectively decide what their answers are as opposed to calling out individuals. The saying that, you know, the nail that sticks out gets the hammer applies to different parts of the world and you do not want to call out people or embarrass them. And so I think that you can flex around cultures. Um, but one thing is the same, no matter what culture you're in, people have experience to bring to work and it doesn't matter if they're on day one, day 100 or their hundredth year at your company, they've got experience to share and your opportunity as a leader is to tap into that full potential.

Shari Simpson:

Leaning on your many years of experience as a CEO, I am sure that you have gotten this right and gotten it wrong, because we all do, when it comes to building psychological safety on your teams and creating that environment where they feel safe to ask questions, to challenge hard things. What has been your approach or what have you found to be successful in building psychological safety on teams? And I ask this because I run into this all the time when we're talking about leadership development and we're talking about talent pipelines and succession planning. And it's great. We can have all the great programs and the great plans, but often we miss this very basic step of building psychological safety first.

Dave Garrison:

That is a great question and worth the effort, whatever effort it takes to create psychological safety. And to take a step back, we're in a buy-in crisis, not just in the US where we're at a decade low of people saying, I'd recommend this as a place to work. It's true in the UK where it's half the rate of the US. It's true in Australia. It's true in France, Germany, Canada, Mexico, on and on. So we're in a crisis and it's not any leader's fault, but a couple of things have changed. COVID gave people a chance to re-examine what work means to them. There's a different generation that values impact as much as money, and we're in a time of great uncertainty. So psychological safety is more important today than it has ever been if retaining talented employees and getting the best results matter to you. If those two things matter, then pay attention to psychological safety. So what's that look like? Three things people are looking for from their workplace today. No surprise, it is number one, they align with the purpose. Why is the work worth doing? Why am I willing to leave my home? Why am I willing to put all this work in? Why am I willing to go the extra mile? Because it's worth it. It's worth it because collectively we are fill in the blank of four to six words of why it matters, never about money. So number one is having a purpose greater than themselves that everybody can see themselves in. Number two, and this is to psychological safety, being seen as a human being, not a human doing. So we talk about in the book, the Buy an Advantage, see people as people first before you ask them what to do. And if you do the drive by, like, how are you? Fine, good. Here's what I want you to do. You've just said you don't care about people. Right? So take the time to recognize the human being and all the highs and lows of being a human being before you go to task land. So being seen as a human being is a precursor to psychological safety. The third is your voice being heard and being heard. I'll tell you what it's not. It's not, hey, I'm going to give you an opinion and you as the leader judge that opinion right away. Great leaders mirror what they heard and ask a humbling question. Did I get that right? And if they didn't get it right, repeat it again and then ask clarifying questions. So when we take a group of leaders, say we have 20 leaders in a room, I'll say to them, do you know what the word chair means? And the answer is, of course I know what chair means. I say, okay, tell me

what I'm thinking about when I say chair. And I'll get 20 different answers. So as a leader, it's really important we don't assume we know what people mean, but people feel heard when you repeat what they say and you ask clarifying questions. Those two things, being heard and seen as a human being, encourage people to share opinions. One of the questions we ask of leadership teams is, how comfortable are you sharing opinions that you know are unpopular? And if the leadership team is not sharing opinions they know that are unpopular, I guarantee nobody below them will. They'll just go, hey boss, great idea. Sure, let's do it. Where are we going to go to lunch? And they're gonna do it the half-baked way.

Shari Simpson:

Man, it brings me back to my college years and all the cognitive dissonance that professors instill in you during that time where you're just uncomfortable and you're wrestling with ideas. And we do that as we are raising our children too, but it's missed in the workplace. We miss this kind of skill set of creating that cognitive dissonance with questions like, Do you know what a chair is? And then digging into that and having people think more broadly. You know, I do love that you mentioned Gen Z. I'm working on my doctorate. I know I showed that on the podcast before, and it's around generations using digital tools and adaptive learning specifically related to HR professional development. And so I've spent a lot of time learning about different generations and I am more than excited, thrilled about Gen Z coming into the workforce and all of the things that they're kind of pushing and redefining what work looks like. I don't hear the same kind of conversations around discretionary effort I heard 10 years ago. I hear more conversations now about purpose and wellness and impact and paths for development. And I think that's rising everybody when we bring those things into the organization. And you touched base on a couple of those. How have you coached around wrapping feedback into this whole process when you know, you've had the good conversations, you're collaborating, somebody makes a misstep, somebody makes the wrong move, and you gotta give feedback. But you don't wanna damage that psychological safety you've created.

Dave Garrison:

Right, so first thing, look in the mirror. If you tell, if I hear from a leader, ah, so and so, screw that, you know, I can't believe they did that, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, I'd ask them, what role did you play in that? And so to me, performance evaluations and feedback are best generated by the person themselves. If we think of ourselves as leaders sitting as judge and jury, okay, I'd like to talk to you about your last year, exactly what happened. Um, you haven't been with them for a year. You haven't been there as they've made decisions and done their work. So you have no place in doing that. However, as a leader, if you've reached an agreement with them at the beginning of the quarter or the year, on exactly what's to be done and you've aligned on that, it doesn't mean you've handed them their objectives, it means you've co-created them because done with is more powerful than done to in generating buy-in. So co-creating objectives, co-agreeing on what that exactly looks like, what the evidence would be. And then asking them, what support can I give you? What do our check-ins look like along the way? Then anywhere along the way as a leader, you can say, Hey, I wanted to check in on our objectives and set up a meeting tomorrow. Would you please be prepared to give me the performance evaluation and allow the other person to evaluate themselves? And what you'll find if you've done it correctly, what you'll find is 80% of what they tell you are things you would have said anyway and you get to add 20% in the form of questions. I'm curious to know when this happened, how did that line up with our value of X or how did that line up against the objective of Y? Because you don't know, you're generally reacting to stories in your head and your opportunity is to understand what was their experience. You could possibly guess their experience. You only know it when you ask, which reinforces psychological safety.

Shari Simpson:

Such good advice, Dave. I do agree we probably could make this episode three hours long and dive into a bunch of other stuff, but we do wanna keep it short and sweet for our audience. So I'll ask you this as our last question. As you look ahead for the trends that you're seeing and based on your experience and your longevity as a CEO, what are some of the trends that you think are gonna most influence organizations going forward to build these, you know, really culturally intelligent, collaborative teams?

Dave Garrison:

You know, I think one thing, um, I want to just touch on one other thing about the current time and mental health that you mentioned. It's so important. And that is the leader's opportunity is to reinforce certainty and to be humble about it and vulnerable themselves because leaders are the ones who start the vulnerability train. And so what that might look like is to say, look, I don't know what's going to happen with interest rates. I don't know how these tariffs are going to affect us. I don't know how this plays out with our customers. I don't know. What I do know for sure, and then anchor back into purpose, anchor back into values, anchor back into current objectives, and anchor back into your belief that together the team can accomplish amazing things. So that vulnerability and that dealing with uncertainty, I think is really important for mental health. So an important trend here is, and what would cause leadership teams to lean in, is when they either get someone who has already done this playbook, and they're willing to listen to them on how to do it differently, or they see a division or a department that's generating huge buy-in, getting great results, and saying, how come the rest of the organization isn't like that? And leader sees other companies that smoke them. We know of one company that's involved in HR recruiting, which is a smile and dial business, not a glamorous business. They recognize that their turnover at 50% was very expensive. They cut their turnover to twice in half and as a result became the most profitable in their business and their competitors are all saying, how do they do that? How do they do that? And the answer is they put people first. And so I think the trend is about if you want to be competitive and getting the best people, retaining the best people and getting the best results, put people first and ask yourself as a leader, how do I build the environment

that allows people to be their best self to tap into full potential? And that is buy-in. So start at buyinbook.com, go take the assessment. It's free and rank yourself on how your company is doing with buy-in.

Shari Simpson:

Dave, I love it. Thanks for taking some time out of your day to sit down and have this really important conversation with me.

Dave Garrison:

Great questions. Thank you so much and good luck on the journey.

Shari Simpson:

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.