

HR Mixtape: Hosted by Shari Simpson with Guest Anita Roach, Founder of the Safe and Sound Workplace Alliance

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 Anita Roach, founder of the Safe and Sound Workplace Alliance. Anita is a strategist focused on psychologically safe, equitable cultures. She is a certified coach, culture talk partner, and strength practitioner. Anita, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

Anita Roach:

Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited. So this is such an important topic. What we're talking about today is really around trauma informed workplaces. And I guess I'll start with this question for those in our audience who maybe have not heard this term before. I've only talked about it a couple of times on the podcast over the years here. What is a trauma-informed workplace? What should it be? Where do we kind of begin at the concept level for it?

Anita Roach:

For me, it really starts with trauma awareness, like remembering that it is human beings that power our organizations and our human systems that have not evolved in that show up with us every day. From that, we can move from trauma affected, you know, trauma unaware into more trauma responsiveness, more trauma sensitivity, starting to do things that can be

trauma reducing by mitigating those involuntary physiological trauma responses that all humans have. And it also means staying away from things that we are doing inadvertently or some people are even doing purposefully, trauma negating, you know, trauma apathy. I have a whole continuum on this that's expanded on some of the trauma-informed organs work to be more for the corporate workplace or larger workplaces. and trauma weaponizing, because trauma weaponizing is a thing that is happening. We're seeing it in many areas. And so how do we bring awareness to the fact that by doing that, you're harming your people, which should be our frontline concern, but it's also very damaging to your profits and your productivity.

Shari Simpson:

And so can we dig into a couple of those terms only because I want to make sure our audience, you know, has a good sense of those things. Let's start with trauma weaponizing. What does that look like?

Anita Roach:

Not to bring in politics, but because this particular quote was all over the news if you watched it, and as somebody who has a partner who was a federal employee until recently, the head of OPM is on record saying, we want to traumatize the bureaucrats so that it's so uncomfortable for them to come to work that they just leave. That was part of the strategy. We see that, I think, a lot in tech companies. So that's the real trauma weaponizing. It's not the trauma, lack of trauma awareness. It's actually understanding it so much that you're putting it to nefarious use because you think it's going to get you the bottom line results that you want.

Shari Simpson:

Yeah, it's, it falls underneath that same concept, which we have talked about before is, especially during the pandemic is this concept around, you don't want to fire somebody cause you don't want to be on the hook necessarily for things like unemployment or lawsuits. And so you make things just really uncomfortable.

Anita Roach:

Yes, there's a term for it. And of course, it's escaping me right now. I've sadly been subjected to it. So it's cognitive dismissal, I think is what it is. When I think about this space for HR, there's so many complexities to it. But also there are some just some baseline things that we have to get right. So, you know, how to start with trauma awareness. idea, we start to educate ourselves as an entire community and our organization is to like idea is the base level that we need to understand here because there are mentalities that are damaging. You know, there there's that idea of, you know, you leave your personal life at home and you don't bring it to work that let's be real, that doesn't exist.

Shari Simpson:

No, I talk about that a lot. We do not check our humanity at the door. We bring these inherent human systems, which is what they are, into the organizational systems, whether the individual wants to or the organization wants them to. We're not living in severance. Despite, I think, the hope that that's what we can get. We do not get to check our humanity at the door. And so with that comes a lot of things. big T trauma and crisis, little T trauma, and the kind of simple, almost seemingly innocuous ways that trauma shows up, trauma response shows up in our organizations. And so the baseline awareness is really that. What does it look like? Not the big crises, you know, we have, you know, an employee talking about suicidal ideation, or we have an employee whose home just burned down in a fire. I mean, we're seeing such an increase in so many things, from climate trauma to childhood trauma to cultural and community trauma. Our crisis traumas are increasing. But it's really about the trauma responses that show up as either things we punish as performance issues or even reward as performance issues. So it's the person in flight who seems to take multiple coffee breaks. or is chronically absent. It's the person in freeze who just does not seem to participate in meetings or is having trouble meeting a deadline because procrastination is an example of the freeze response. It's the person in fight who is either incredibly aggressive or constantly complaining. because that is a different type of fight response, especially that comes out sometimes in women because we're not afforded that assertiveness oftentimes in the workplace. And it comes out in the people

who take the blame and pick up the slack, work 24-7, are constantly available, don't complain. They're often named Anita. They suffer from burnout. My research all started as I was going through a second major burnout and I was trying to figure out why did this happen to me? When I went to work, for an organization as opposed to consulting because I've been consulting for almost 30 years now on and off. Every once in a while somebody draws me in and I go in to fix a problem and inevitably burnout would happen or I would get incredibly sick or I started having chronic health issues. and a little over a decade ago during one of these. And I was still working, I was still performing, we were still winning work, but I was definitely having struggles. And it's when I was diagnosed with complex PTSD. from a very difficult childhood that included the loss of my mom when I was eight and a lot of neglect and abuse and various things, blame for a lot of things. And so my trauma response is fawning. And I think a lot of people in, I mean, one thing for HR people to keep in mind is fawning is often gonna show up because it is a rare person who has the luxury to permanently flee their job. We, you know, the norm is not to fight that aggressively, you know, so remembering that is a really important thing because people will fawn and fall into the workaholic behaviors and the always on culture and responding to emails at midnight or writing them at midnight because that need to appease and please because of that perceived threat. Because our internal involuntary physiological systems have not changed since we were walking out of the caves to hunt for food and the T-Rex was standing there. And we had four choices. And those four choices to response to threat are the same ones we have today. We have, that's just the case. And that's why the systemic institutional piece is so important. I love this quote from Edward O. Wilson. He says, the problem with humanity is we have paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and godlike technology. and it's more than paleolithic emotions. It's our whole systems as humans are barely paleolithic and technology is not going to slow down. So it is in those medieval institutions, those systems that haven't changed since there was predominantly one type of person who worked in the office, and they had humans at home that took care of the humanity, either in spouses or servants. And so, we have an opportunity to really change those systems to

support the human systems, which are not upgrading anytime soon, apparently.

Shari Simpson:

I mean, it'd be nice if we could upgrade our emotional resilience. You know, I mean, I think we could spend, you know, tons of time talking about policy, but but I'd like to to anchor us a little bit, you know, how I think in starting with organizing, how do we how do we just begin to to change? How do we start to see organizations that are ready or not ready for this kind of change? And how do we start to think what that looks like. I guess I kind of put this in the bucket of, you know, start to act for the role you want, not the role you have. How do we do that in this instance?

Anita Roach:

Yes. And I think it sounds really scary, right? It sounds like we have to shred every employee manual and every policy and start from scratch. I don't believe that. I believe there's seven basic, what I call the safe and sound agreements that we can start to adopt today, a couple that make huge impact right away. So that's be cognizant, and anybody can do this. And it really is something we need to require everybody in our organization to do because one non-cognizant person can cause the same damage that a hundred non-cognizant people can do. And be cognizant is really setting behavioral guidelines and Teaching people to be aware of their body positioning, their tone, their language, their hand gestures. I joke a lot in my talks. I am Italian. I tend to talk with my hands and I've become really aware. Because for somebody who has had an abusive childhood or is a victim of domestic violence, that quick hand gesture can feel like, you know, the amygdala is saying, oh, this person is about to hit me. and your whole logic center shuts down. So being cognizant and having those clear behavioral, not the big behavioral things that most manuals have, but really distinct, clear behavioral, don't tower over somebody sitting at their desk. I tell a story, I had six very large division managers one time tower over my desk. And for the many of us, the half of women and one third of men who have experienced sexual violence, that's intimidating to begin with. But then when they don't respect boundaries of, no, I can't work another 30 hours this week, I've

already worked 90. It's just another example of no not meaning no again. And so, that's a be cognizant piece. The other is having clear accountability around that, that is for everybody. You know, Joe or Sally, who happens to be your highest performer, doesn't get a free PAMAS. And oftentimes, that's what we see. is that lack of accountability across the board, because it's scary to put consequences in place. And certain people don't get held accountable the same way others do. And so those to me are two easy things that you can start to implement. And even as an HR person or anybody listening, you can start to do that yourself and start to model what that looks like.

Shari Simpson:

Such good examples, especially around those employees who are difficult. but who are meeting their KPIs. You know, when I was, when I was earlier in my career, I was in a, an organization, we had cubicles and, and so, uh, open air cubicles. And so the, the kind of the cubicle section across the way from me, there was a leader there, um, who was a yeller. I mean, a yeller. And that particular department, it was a, a male leader, all female staff. Um, and they, they met their metrics every, every month, every quarter. Um, but the environment that those employees was working in was terrible. And I remember bringing it up cause obviously I was in HR. Um, I was in a training development role, so a little bit different than, you know, maybe a business partner role, but. I remember bringing it up and saying, like, hey, what what's what are we doing with this person? Like, this is this is bad. Like the stuff that I'm overhearing, you know, everybody else on the floor can hear, too. You know, are they being coached? Are they on a performance improvement plan? You know, and it's like. Well, no, they meet their metrics. They're kind of a difficult manager. And granted, this was, you know, probably 15 years ago now. And I think that some of that kind of, you know, mentality has changed for sure. But there's other complexities. You know, maybe you're working in an organization that's family owned, right? And so you have family dynamics that you have to deal with on top of that thing. You know, I loved your example of being somebody who talks with your hands, right? Something that's very natural to you and how you use your own body and communicate can be intimidating to somebody else. Those are all really, really great places to start to think about how we show up, how we take up space, how we leave space

for people, how we engage people. You know, I'm, I'm an extrovert to the nth degree. Um, and so one of the tactics that I learned throughout my career in team meetings is making sure to ask people individually, what do you think? You know, so I'm giving space for the introverts. But as I've kind of evolved in my own knowledge of things, even that practice, although well-intentioned, can be intimidating for someone. So really great examples there.

Anita Roach:

Yeah, it's one, I will say one of the first things people moving into new offices or redesigning their offices can do is open concept offices are not trauma-informed. for the very reasons you mentioned. There's no safe space. People are not having private conversations, corrective conversations. The big danger, one thing anybody can do is let's not do the fly-by hallway, hey, I need to talk to you, come to my office in five minutes. Fear that that induces, especially for people who were punished a lot, is very damaging. So that's a simple trauma-informed, trauma-sensitive thing you can do. Not having open air offices because of the various reasons. For meetings, making sure that there's clear agendas that are produced beforehand, especially if they're a meeting where there's some natural anxiety around it, a project is falling behind or whatever. Um, those are really simple, just practical, good business things to do that start to mitigate those small trauma responses. They're big trauma responses for the person, but they seem just kind of irritating or Again, we put them on a performance improvement plan because of various things, or we reward the fact that they're working 22 hours a day, which I've actually done, and being thoughtful around that. And realizing that because we're all humans, your experience is not my experience. I call it the whole human approach. So it's who we're genetically designed to be that could be our genetic ancestry related to race, it could be our gender, a whole host of things, what we're good at. There's our neural processing, and sometimes that's impacted genetically or in utero, and sometimes it's acquired. For example, PTSD is an acquired neurodivergence. and our lived experiences, which it would be nice to think everybody in the corporate world, because I think this is one of the misnomers, right, is that people with significant trauma, complex PTSD, PTSD, are not in our corporate workspaces. And it's just a lie, because 70% of adults have some level of trauma, 37% have

significant childhood trauma. Gen Z, the number is 57%. because they are the generation that grew up in the pandemic with active shooter drills starting when they were five years old in the United States. All of that, their parents and the food insecurity and housing security that the pandemic caused. So they're not lazy, they're in trauma response. And it's just a different trauma response than what Gen X did, for example. because there's more opportunities to gig work and do things. So, they don't have to stay so much. So it's understanding the generational differences in trauma. It's just being aware. Oh, you know, and then acknowledging your role. You know, awareness is we have a 40% higher turnover rate, which is the stat for non-trauma-informed, psychologically safe, psychosocially sound businesses. 40% higher turnover rate, which we know the costs of that are extensive. If you have a 40% turnover rate higher all of a sudden, that's not an individual's resilience problem. That's not a generation's laziness problem. That's an internal systemic issue. moving from that awareness into acknowledgement of the root cause and being honest with ourselves as leaders and decision makers and organizations, that is when you're ready. If we move from awareness into immediate action, one, that's not trauma-informed because it causes chaos. And those feelings of chaos are very much associated with trauma-impacted people. But it also doesn't get the buy-in we need. It doesn't allow for stakeholder engagement. It doesn't allow for clear agreements from top to bottom. So really moving from awareness to acknowledgement, then building advocacy around the change you want to make, and then clear agreements. You know, I call them declarations of commitment in the book. The CEO has to sign one that they're committing to the resources and the accountability and the leadership. I just saw an article from the CEO of Duolingo that just came out this morning. 42 new hires, new graduates, so all Gen Z. And he told them, we're allergic to toxic behaviors here. As a culture, we identify it and reject it immediately. He talked about taking initiative, kind of universal leadership type concepts. He talked about being nice. He talked about not about work-life balance and what it means for success. He's on record saying that. Now, I love a written commitment because you can bring the paper in, but because of the size of the company and who he is, the whole world now knows that he is committed to that. So now, if you're not seeing

that in his organization, people can say something because we know many companies who post their values and then don't actually apply those. We've seen that recently with Wells Fargo and the woman who sadly passed away at her desk and was not discovered for multiple days. We see that in the suicides at EY. Your values talk about psychological safety and all of this, but what's really happening?

Shari Simpson:

This has been a very interesting conversation, and I think there's probably hours and hours of content that we could go through. But as we wrap our conversation, I'd love you to think about that HR professional who's trying to learn about this, trying to inform themselves so that they can help really get their organizations ready and move forward. Where do they start? What are the resources they should be looking at? I mean,

Anita Roach:

One of the reasons I did this research and started writing the book and all of that is because there wasn't a lot out there. We're seeing some change there. So you can look into Stephanie Lemick's work at the Wounded Workforce, Dawn Amarek's work, hopefully my work. So the book, Safe and Sound, Cultivating a Whole Human Trauma-Informed Approach for Employee and Employer Well-Being, because both need to happen. and both are being negatively impacted. It has a lot of resources. It even has an advocacy workbook in there to help you start to develop a plan. And it has tools for different levels of stakeholder engagement. It has those sample declarations. You can visit safeandsound.work, which is a new community. It's been there a while, but now it's actually ready to launch, and there's courses there. My building trauma awareness course, which is approved for three HRCI recertification credits. And I'm going to be offering some discounts. So check out the show notes there for your listeners to be able to join at a special rate. You can download a done for you presentation on the business case that talks about all the statistics. and all the positive statistics when we do these things. And it's pre-done for you, so you can take that into your leaders and prove your case. So you can download that on my website. And yeah, just learn as much as you can, really. And remember, you're human, we're all human, and

those systems aren't changing. So let's change the systems that we can change.

Shari Simpson:

Thank you for all the resources and for taking some time of your day to chat with me. It was so great. I appreciate everything you do. I love listening to the podcast, so I'm really honored to now be a guest.

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.