The HR Mixtape: Hosted by Shari Simpson with Guest Dr. Caroline Brookfield, Veterinarian, Researcher, and Keynote Speaker

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. Caroline Brookfield, a veterinarian, researcher, and keynote speaker who helps teams embrace ambiguity and spark creativity. With over 25 years of global experience in high-stakes environments, she knows how to lead through change with confidence. Caroline blends science, humor, and real-world insights to inspire action and innovation.

Shari Simpson:

Caroline, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today. I'm so excited to be here. So cliche podcast thing to say.

Dr. Caroline Brookfield:

It is, but I'm excited that you're here. We were just chatting a little bit before we started, and I'm just so impressed with your profession and what you do and your focus on leadership. And I learned that you do some standup comedy, which I didn't know, and that's fantastic. So I think you are going to be perfect for our audience. I'm glad you're here. Maybe we can start with you sharing just a little bit about your background and your journey before we get into our topic about ambiguity and creative leadership.

Dr. Caroline Brookfield:

Great. Well, I'll warn you, I'm not the best at these elevator pitches. My training, you know, listeners probably don't know is that I'm trained as a veterinarian. I've been a veterinarian for 28 years. And I had this kind of long, weird, bumpy creative journey to determining that I love speaking, you know, I love performance and drama, but I'm a terrible actor. I kind of, you know, like many people in their career, things kind of merge together. And I started professional speaking. And the topic I just, I chose was this idea that we all show up so much in these boxes and what society expects us to look like. And I didn't. And people would say, well, how do you do this? And why do you do that? And I realized it was all about creativity, which is engaging with what makes us different and unique and sharing that with the world, really.

Shari Simpson:

I love that because I would describe myself as a multi-passionate individual. Sometimes that's hard to describe to people when they ask like, hey, where do you want to be in five years? I was like, I don't know. I was like, I could be doing these five things and they would all make me happy. Not all people are wired that way, but there is something to be said about tapping into your creative juices that I think we don't talk about enough as leaders and as people in general who are in kind of the corporate space. So how did you, you know, come to the conclusion about helping leaders understand that like the same old way of thinking and that exploring creativity is actually hindering them?

Dr. Caroline Brookfield:

Yeah, well, I think the first thing that needs to be addressed is the definition of creativity, because some people still think it's like arts and crafts and macrame and finger painting. And it's not true at all, because it's such a tiny word to encapsulate everything that it represents. And researchers have split it up into a number of different categories. And broadly, there's big C creativity, which is like the iPhone and massive inventions that are celebrated in that domain. And then there's small C creativity, And that's what I talk about because I can't even draw a stick stick. I can't sing. But that small C creativity is things like just building a pivot table that shaves 10 minutes off your

reporting. Creativity is like creating a shift schedule so that everybody's happy. Creativity is just taking something in your brain that's an idea and implementing it into the world. And so I think the first thing is knowing that you don't have to be artistic or some innovator or Steve Jobs to be creative, and that we all have that capacity to do it. And then from there, it's thinking about what are the creative habits that I need to practice so that I have it on tap all the time, because it's not something you schedule into your calendar on a Friday at 2pm to do like, you know, paint night or paint day or whatever. You can do that. That's great. Also has lots of benefits. I'm not, I'm not dissing it at all, but it's how do I embed this creative mindset throughout my leadership journey so that I can start seeing things differently and finding new solutions and, and knowing especially that leaders are negatively primed for creativity. Like leaders will say, we want something creative, but in the tests, when they kind of test that they actually don't, they don't want creativity. So it's like an awareness about what's holding them back from like a creative mindset potential, but also knowing that being in a position as a decision maker negatively influences your ability to be creative as well.

Shari Simpson:
What are some of those things that you've seen are holding leaders back from doing this?

Dr. Caroline Brookfield:
A lot of it is related to, well, their butt's on the line, right? They don't want to fail. So anything you do that's creative is new. It's different. It's not able to be assessed in a way you can't tell if it's, if you think something's going to work, it's probably not creative because if it's truly creative, it's never been done before. So you can't have like a gut feeling about it. So I think that fear of failure is a big thing holding people back. I think the subconscious bias against creativity that's not deliberate is also holding leaders back and probably, you know, a fear of putting themselves in harm's way, whether that's like an organizational failure and the team and then putting, you know, revenue at risk and jobs at risk. And so there's a lot on the line for leaders. So I get it.

Shari Simpson:

How do you create that space then for them to be, A, willing to take the risk and B, in an environment where the leadership above them will allow that risk to be taken?

Dr. Caroline Brookfield:

Yeah, I mean, you hit on the nail on the head. Psychological safety, you have to feel supported, you have to have the freedom to take risks. I mean, Gallup identified three criteria for an organization to be creative, time, to be creative, expectation to be creative, and freedom to take risks. That's it. If you have those three things, you're a creative organization. So freedom to take risks, that's the hard part.

Shari Simpson:

Yeah, it's that. And I think there is something to be said about the time piece. I'm reading this book right now by Johan Hari, and it's about focus and how as a society, our focus is changing with the advancement of technology and how we have to really work to get back to like flow state and those types of things. And one of the examples he gave was, you know, when we were younger, and I guess I should look up to see how old he is, but it resonated with me. When we were younger, we could sit and read books and, you know, devour them and be focused and have that time. And now You know, we're like, let me get let me get through the book. Let me check it off my Goodreads list. You know, and you're not kind of sitting and thinking about that. I have found for myself that when I am most creative, it's because I've had that space to let my mind almost wander. You know, I find like you're in the shower and you have this brilliant idea and you have to go write it down. How do we embed that into our work day, though?

Dr. Caroline Brookfield:

Yeah, so I talk a lot about these five habits that I've developed from my own experience exercising my non-artistic creativity and also a lot of the research and data around this and it spells the word dance and one of the ones you hit on is daydreaming, right? So I think embedding in our day these times to put our phones down There's that trend now. Have you seen this? It's kind of like

the bro culture where they just stare at the map on the plane for like four or five hours. Yeah, like try to like decrease their dopamine. So to your point, we need to give our brains space to process because we have this system called the default mode network, which is fascinating. And they found it by accident. And basically, when we're thinking about nothing, our mind is very, very active, in fact, more active in certain ways than when we're thinking about something. And it's because we're trying to connect all these ideas and thoughts and problems that we're trying to solve. And we don't even know what's happening. So it feels like nothing. So I think that we need to reframe this idea around what productivity is as well, right? Like it's not unproductive to think about a problem and then go for a walk and gaze at nature because that's when you come up with like in the shower because you've got some visual stimuli that are that's limited, but you're doing something. So you're keeping your executive functioning part of your brain busy, which is usually the part of the brain that's like, that's dumb, don't do that. Everybody thinks that's, you know, silly. And so because you're kind of doing something, your brain's a little bit busy, but not so busy, you don't capture those ideas in your consciousness. So there's a lot to be said for making space in the day for daydreaming. I think that's one of the biggest things.

Shari Simpson:
What else is included in that dance model?

Dr. Caroline Brookfield:
So the second one is ambiguity, a whole, I mean, I just, I love talking about ambiguity. So ambiguity being something in the world that you're uncertain about. So when you see something ambiguous, like the blue or gold dress, is it blue? Is it gold? That's ambiguous. And it makes us feel uncertain. And so much of that, like, coming out as like a fire hose and the ability to sit in ambiguity is very conducive to creativity. So if we feel uncertain, it makes us jump to things that have worked in the past. We have a very strong push to status quo. So if you're able to take a deep breath and sit in that ambiguity and feel that discomfort of not knowing the answer, then you can look at other possibilities. So ambiguity is the second one. N is for novelty. So You know, hang out with the same people, do the same stuff, you're not going to

have a lot of ingredients for your brain when it's daydreaming to come up with these amazing ideas in the shower. So doing new things, trying new things, learning new skills, travel is a big one. The C is for curiosity, because if we don't wonder how things could be different, how are we ever going to use our creativity as foundational. And then the last one is kind of take some explanation, but you know, and building an acronym is like, well, what are how what letters am I going to put here. So the last one is E for editing later. And that's a very important if I were to say what the other other than daydream would be the embed in the day is this idea of When you're trying to think of an idea, we tend to criticize it as it comes up, like, oh, that's a dumb idea, or I don't want to share that. And so there's two parts of creative thinking. There's divergent and convergent. And divergent is, how could we get a unicorn to the moon? But a convergent question is very focused in one answer, like, which unicorn is going to the moon? So I say, if I'm writing a poem, a divergent question would be, what should I write my poem about? But a convergent question would be, what word belongs in this sentence? And a quote I love from attributed to Ernest Hemingway, which encapsulate this, right drunk, sober. What good advice. Yeah. So you don't have to drink, but the idea of like letting your inhibitions go. And when you're in idea generation mode, like be in it, don't try to judge your ideas. Like, you know, the guys, the guy or the gals at the whiteboard, the boss or the most creative person, people are shouting out the ideas and then they just pause. Is that really the idea? And it's like, no, just write it down, you know, no judgment.

Shari Simpson:
Yeah, I don't know for those listening, I'm sure most of you have. And there's this exercise I've done when we've been doing greenbelt activities and kaizans and those types of activities where it's like a giant post-it note experience where you just dump brain dump onto these post-it notes and you stick them on the wall and no, no ideas off limits. There's no budget, there's no... And some of it is very creative and hilarious and you have a good laugh over it. But I have always walked away from those sessions with brand new ideas that we had no idea somebody in our team kind of was storing in their mental load, you know, as they were going through the day. So I love that. I think that idea of giving space for creativity and curiosity is so important. You know, I'm

one of those people who definitely live underneath the idea of ask for forgiveness later. You know, do the thing, ask for forgiveness later. And you already aren't doing the thing. So if you're curious and you ask and the answer is going to be no, that's OK. The answer already was no. There's no harm in asking and being curious. I know that I'm a little bit of an outlier, though. And as a leader, you know, I find it really important for me to help instill that in my team. And one of those things that you talked about in that dance model is that ambiguity is helping your team sit in ambiguity. So I guess this is a two part question is one, how does how do leaders start to build that into their team so that they can feel that ambiguity? And then how do they foster it after it's built in the team so that they're still meeting things that they have to meet, right? That they still have their unfortunately, their productivity metrics that they have to meet. We can't just sit in ambiguity forever.

Dr. Caroline Brookfield:
Yeah, like we have to make decisions and move forward, right? Yeah. So when it comes to ambiguity, there's this interesting paradox. So when you look at the research around leading people, role ambiguity is highly stressful, highly predictive of burnout. So people need to know what they need to do in their jobs. So that you need to resolve. So we need to resolve the ambiguity where we can at the higher level where it matters. Like, what am I supposed to be doing here? And then the other thing is that because we have smartphones and we have the answers at our fingertips, especially in younger generations, our tolerance of ambiguity is dropping. And so what that means is we cannot sit in that place of not knowing. So as a leader, the two things you need to do is resolve that role ambiguity with clarity so people know what they need to do and give them a little bit of room to implement it in the way they want. And this is all assuming that there is that safety for them to take risks and that they're supported in taking a small risk and moving through the ambiguity. You know, we feel ambiguity in nine different ways with the research out of the University of Queensland. It's not just like, do I not know what I'm doing? It revolves around managing the uncertainty, moving teams through uncertainty. It also revolves around our desire for leaning into challenges and problems. Like, are we just going to take the first answer or are we going to dig deeper? And that's a dimension of tolerance of ambiguity, as well as social

ambiguity. Like someone might be really comfortable not knowing the answer, but then you put them in a situation where they don't know anybody and then they become very anxious because they don't know how people are going to react to them. So ambiguity itself is like a massive, massive topic. But I think the two things that leaders can do is really focus on reducing that role ambiguity. What is the goal here? And helping them feel supported to move through that and know that we don't have to have all the answers right away. And to your point about productivity and getting things done, I think that it's probably situation dependent, right? Like if you know that there's a system that works really well, like why are we sitting in ambiguity about it? Just get it done. And maybe the creative part is how do we message or how do we communicate this system and help people feel like they're comfortable and trained on this process that we already feel it works and nothing's broken versus this process isn't working. Now we need to use our creativity to think about how we can adapt it so that it is more efficient. So creativity, there's a place for creativity within productivity, but there's also a way with like reducing ambiguity where we can, because that is also protective against burnout. If we build our tolerance of ambiguity, when that's combined with self-compassion, it's also very protective against burnout. So we have these two kind of dimensions that leaders need to manage in different ways.

Shari Simpson:
And you've created or have access to a quiz that helps leaders kind of measure ambiguity in their team, right?

Dr. Caroline Brookfield:
Well, yeah, so I'm accredited in the University of Queensland and Adaptive Minds have this Tolerance of Ambiguity Assessment, which is kind of like a Myers-Briggs or DISC for ambiguity. And so that one's like a validated test and, you know, you have to sign up for it and it's like a whole system. But I created this like kind of fun 10 or 11 question quiz to give you a sense of whether your team is handling ambiguity well. You know, and some listeners might be wondering, well, what does this have to do with creativity, even though it's a habit? What got me most interested in this ambiguity research is that creativity is the single factor that influences all nine dimensions of tolerance

of ambiguity. So if you use your creativity, you will start to become more tolerant of ambiguity. because anything creative is stepping off the unknown, or stepping off the known into the unknown, risking failure. And the more we do that, in whatever capacity that is, whether it's painting Game of Thrones figurines, or building, painting a garden, that will help you with the ambiguity. So back to the quiz. But yes, I have this quiz that kind of just gives you an idea of whether your team is handling ambiguity well or not. And then an opportunity to chat with me, like no pressure just to say like, what are some quick wins I can get here.

Shari Simpson:
I love that. And I'll make sure to include a link to your resources in the show notes for anybody listening. As we wrap up our conversation, I'd love for you to leave our HR professionals with maybe one tactic or tool or approach that they can use to bring back to their C-suite to say, hey, we need to increase creativity in the organization. This is what I'd like you to do.

Dr. Caroline Brookfield:
One tactic, that's hard, Shari, to help build the creativity in their teams.

Shari Simpson:
To help them see the value in it and that it's going to impact their business in such a good way. You know, a lot of times it's got to start with the top. There's like, there's that safety you said. They've got to know from their leadership team at the highest levels, we have the space to do this.

Dr. Caroline Brookfield:
Well, I could rattle off some quick stats, like 83% of companies want to deliver on innovation, but only 3% are ready to deliver. Why? You need creativity. is basically the cornerstone of innovation. Also, when you're looking at creativity, people who feel like they're using their creativity are half as likely to be looking for another job. that feel like they're using their creativity. It's not like they are creative and it engages employees. The creative study that Calla talked about where it's a creative organization, they're more productive, they're more profitable. Like there's so many ways because I think the C-suite

often needs data, right? Because creativity feels so ambiguous. Speaking of ambiguity and creativity feels esoteric, it feels fluffy, it feels like a nice to have. But if you want to differentiate your organization, either with employee retention engagement or with innovation and navigating change with more confidence, then creativity influences both our tolerance of ambiguity as an organization and as individuals in it, but also our ability to change and adapt and build more productive and efficient, because it takes creativity to build an efficient process. So I don't know, that doesn't really answer us a lot more than one.

Shari Simpson:

No, I think it's exactly what I was hoping for. And you leaned into something I talk about a lot is come with data, bringing the data to support what you kind of intuitively know as an HR practitioner, show it how it's going to impact the business. So absolutely amazing answer. This was a great conversation. I'm so glad you were able to jump on the podcast with me for a little bit today.

Dr. Caroline Brookfield:

Oh, this was so much fun. Thank you. It went by so fast.

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.