— Joining me today is Heather Burright, founder and CEO of Skill Masters Market. Leveraging over 15 years of experience, Heather specializes in creating dynamic people-centric solutions that drive business goals. With her comes expertise in strategies for diversity, equity and inclusion, structural design, and change management. She's dedicated to identifying core competencies that are needed to see real results and to creating the learning strategies and solutions needed to develop those competencies. Heather, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

— I'm so excited to be here with you.

— So I would love if you could start by telling us a little bit more about your background and the work that you do at the Skill Master's market.

— Yeah, I would love to. So the short answer is training leadership development for nonprofits. That's kind of my focus area. I love doing custom training, instructional design, those kinds of things for nonprofits as well as competency models. And I have a team of instructional designers, change management consultants, executive coaches, e-learning developers, voiceover artists, and graphic designers that I bring into projects as needed. And typically, like I said, the focus is on either competency models, so really kind of thinking through that foundational component of what could end up being part of the learning strategy or functional training. So helping people, especially in a social service nonprofit type of environment, helping people with some of the basic skills or tasks they're going to be doing as part of their role. And then also leadership development programs. So maybe looking at what are the leaders of the future gonna need or what are some of those things that people who are already in leadership roles are going to need moving forward? So that's kind of the bulk of my work. And then I also host a top-3% globally ranked podcast called "Learning for Good", and I'm the moderator of the nonprofit L and D collective, which is a free virtual community for HR, DEI, and talent development leaders who are working inside of nonprofits, just giving them a space to come together and kind of tackle their toughest challenges together virtually.

— Oh my gosh, you have so many hats in the air and we'll definitely make sure to put in the show notes, the links to all the things. What got you so excited about supporting nonprofits specifically?

— Yeah, it's interesting. I actually get that question a lot because it is a little bit of a unique niche, I think in this particular area

of training and leadership development. So my career, I would say, split between nonprofit and not nonprofit. I worked in for-profit higher education as well as government prior to nonprofit, but about the last maybe eight years working internally was at a national nonprofit. And I just fell in love with the people and the type of work, the impact that you're able to have and also some of the complexities that come with nonprofits. I think that some of those are kind of exciting and interesting to work on. An example of that would be like measuring the impact of training suddenly becomes much harder in a nonprofit that's federated because there's no real line of sight into what happens after that training is completed and the person is now implementing whatever it is they learned. And so really tackling some of those complex issues, I find it really exciting. And so that's where I ended up.

- I love that. It's so great to talk to people who have a real passion for the work they're doing and the populations they serve. So one of the reasons I wanted to bring you on is we've been hearing a lot of talk around this shift to a more skills-based approach on how we think about talent development. So I'm curious if we can start with you discussing any challenges or pitfalls that companies might be facing when they're moving to this skills-based approach, and how do you suggest that they start to navigate those challenges?

- Yeah, great question. And I assume that many of your listeners are familiar with a skills-based approach. Many of them may even have competency models in place in their organization. But basically, you know, when an organization starts to identify those skills that are going to be needed across the organization, like in a competency model, that is when you're starting to think about and take that skills based approach and then you're intentionally developing those skills in your people through things like assessments and training and coaching and other solutions like that. I focus primarily on talent development. So that's what I'll focus on in my answers around challenges and pitfalls. But this other areas of HR use the competencies and the skills based approach as well in things like hiring and evaluating staff, succession planning right there, it shows up in a lot of different places in the employee life cycle. So I'm curious, I'll be curious to see if you think this challenge is the same in those other areas of HR as it is for talent development. But I found that the hardest part about taking an approach like this is actually identifying which skills are most important in the organization. And that maybe that goes without saying, right, but creating a competency model and identifying those skills that are important is a time-intensive project. And time is the one thing that many of us feel like we don't have enough of, right? And so it represents a lot of time, a lot of resources. It also represents a change in the organization. And change is always hard. It's always hard to lead, to manage and to respond to. And so it really should be treated like a change project as well. So what I recommend as far as

navigating those two, the time piece and the change piece, is really being intentional with the process that you use to identify those skills. And the first thing is to look at the organization itself internally. Where is the organization headed? What does the strategic plan say? Or whatever other organizational strategies you have, what does your DEI commitment say? What are your organizational values, right? So all of those things that are already documented in your organization that show the direction that you're headed, those are the the first things to take a look at. But also ask your people. Again, it's a change project and you want your people to feel like their voice was heard and you also want it to represent what they actually do or feel like they need to do. And so we wanna get your people involved. We wanna conduct focus groups or interviews. We wanna ask good questions to figure out what skills they're using on a regular basis, what skills they feel like are lacking either in themselves or in a team member sometimes, and what they think will be needed in the future. Because many times they also have an eye for what's happening with their particular area in the future, like marketing or whatever area they work in. So you can do this research of kind of this document review, looking at where you're headed as an organization and also talking to your people. And then you can start to look for trends and start to identify what those priorities are. And then once you have some of those priorities, you can start to shape what those look like. And then you can go back to your staff. Again, it's a change project. We want them involved as much as possible and get their input again. So you're really validating what you found and you're iterating over time. And you do that until you get to a place where you feel like the skills are clearly mapped out and defined. And then you end up with a product. Again, it's time intensive, but you end up with a product that you can feel pretty confident represents those priority skills and that you feel like your people are ready to adopt, because they had a part in the process. And then you can use that information to inform your talent development initiatives as well as those other parts of your employee lifecycle. And I'm happy to give an example of like what that actually looks like, if that's helpful. I know it's a lot of words when you start talking process, but when it comes to something so time intensive and something that does represent such a big change, it's so important to think through that process ahead of time.

– I completely agree. I think that's one of the first things I learned early in my HR career is conducting those analysis, right? Skills, inventories, needs analysis, going through kind of all that project planning it. This is a big project. If you've never done this before in your organization, it takes a lots and lots of iterations. It takes a really good understanding of where you are now and where you wanna go, what things we see now and what things are aspirational. But it definitely touches more than just talent development. You know, if you have a really great skills based view of looking at talent, that's gonna affect what your recruiting looks like, how you incorporate some

of those skills words into your job postings, how you think about maybe what your employee value proposition looks like, how do you show up on Glassdoor? You can wrap in all of that skills language into it. So it's really important work. What are some misconceptions that you have heard or encountered in your work and have helped organizations to address some of those related to skills?

- Yeah, I don't know if this is a misconception exactly, but I think it just feels so abstract, right? We start talking about skills, it feels very abstract for some reason, even though it's actually pretty tangible. And we hear a lot, especially right now about the future of work. skills for the future, that kind of thing. And it just feels like it's out there cloudy somewhere and it doesn't feel like something that we can really figure out, like who says those are the skills of the future? How can you actually be sure those are the skills of the future? And so by creating a competency model and using it, that's actually a great way to make those skills that maybe seem abstract, a lot more concrete. And it's more concrete because you're able to not just identify the skills, like say communication, but you're able to describe what that looks like in action in different roles in your organization. So each competency, if you think about a competency model, each competency has behavioral indicators associated with them. And so those behavioral indicators start to describe proficiency. And when you're creating a custom competency model and you're tailoring it to your organization, you get the opportunity to say exactly what you want communication to look like for say, your support roles or your supervisory roles or your executive leadership roles or whatever, you know, individual contributor, whatever roles you have in your organization and how you want to differentiate those. And so for example, in a support role, you might say communication proficiency is when you are asking good questions and you are acting with curiosity and you are seeking to understand what the other person is saying. And that might be how you want to define proficiency for communication. And so your behavioral indicators can start to represent that and they can see that. And then at the executive leadership level, you might say, you know, what they obviously need to know how to ask questions and seek to understand, but at this point, they're a thought leader in the industry and they need to be able to communicate with influence or they need to be able to advocate for your organization's mission for the impact that you're trying to have. And so your behavioral indicators for communication will represent that. And so now it's tailored to your organization and to your specific needs and strategies and your people. And that makes it even more concrete and easier to implement.

- I've also seen organizations go one level deeper than also what you just mentioned, meaning that if you've got your competency model that has your skills and behaviors and it's broken out by different level and what you know, working good and you know, proficient in looks like, you can add in that other layer where you can drill down into

those behavior specific to a role as well. If you wanna really kind of dig into, you know, for example, what does a software engineer's communication look like at a mid-level role, right? So we can get very complex. So if you're listening and you're like, oh my gosh, that sounds like so much work, it's baby steps. Like you're not gonna go from one to a hundred for sure. How have you seen technology really support this idea of a skills-based approach? Especially because we've seen so much advancement in technology and you know, I think a lot of times, I think about my own project management stuff. I'm always looking for like the perfect tool and we can kind of get stuck on that. So how is technology impacting this?

- Yeah, I think from a technology perspective, and I'm not a tech expert, I don't know exactly how technology will change and evolve over time, right? But if we think about the way people engage with technology in general, that has continued to change and evolve. So we see more and more systems and apps that are telling us what we might want to watch next, right? If you think about Netflix suggesting new shows for us. We are seeing more and more systems and apps that are recommending what to read next. If I finish a book on my Kindle, it tells me which one I might be interested in doing next. Same with purchases. It tells us constantly what we might need to purchase. Now we're in the future, and that's based on past history, your unique goals, your unique interests. It's using all of that information to then make recommendations to you. So if you think about your Facebook ads, just as an example, right? Like I feel like this may not be true, right? You're probably gonna agree with me. I can think I kind of even iron. I never even say the words out loud and all of a sudden I have 42 ads in my feed for irons. I never even voiced that. But everything else that I'm doing in my life apparently, is telling Facebook that I might need a new iron. So by the time I realize I need it, they've already realized I need it and are showing me ads for it. And I think our learning tech has to keep up. And so there are, you know, learning technologies that suggest, you know, here's another course you might like, or here's something else you might wanna learn. But the other thing that I've found with tech, if you think about tech and other areas of our life, is that it's really simple. It's really accessible. I don't have to go looking for those ads. I don't have to do anything other than turn my TV on and select Netflix to be having new suggestions show up. It's accessible. And so you don't have to jump through a bunch of hoops to see what's recommended for you. And I'm not sure that's always the case with learning technology and even HR systems in general. And I think that's gonna be the biggest thing that we have to look at and consider, how is our learning technology, how are HR systems going to keep up with the way people are engaging with technology in other places? Because that's what people are used to and that's what people expect.

- And it's complicated when you think of HR systems in general.

– Yes, there's a lot of data.

– Yeah. Obviously, you know, this podcast is powered by Paylocity, so you know, I have a vested interest in where the HCMs are going. But it is fascinating because there's so much complexity with HRIS and HCM systems when it comes to payroll and privacy and security and data links and all that kind of stuff. But you're absolutely right. there is this move to more personalized content in general, in a more personalized view of HR. I've talked about this before about taking a one size fits one approach instead of a one size fits all approach when you're dealing with employees. This is just one more great example of that, you know. As we wrap our discussion, I'm curious, as you've worked with different organizations to identify those, you know, near future skills for their organizations, is there any trends that you're seeing in general as we think about the future of work and the skills that we're gonna need?

– Yeah, I mean, I think communication and collaboration are two that will never go out of style, right? They're never going away. They're always going to be in demand. What it looks like to be a good communicator might change as technology evolves and workplaces change, but we're never gonna not need to communicate. So I think that you're gonna still see some of those show up time and time again in different skills based approaches across different organizations. But what I think is new, or at least maybe elevated in a different way than it has been in the past, is there's something to this like human element that's been elevated in the last year or two. And I think will continue to be elevated over the next several years. And by that I mean the human element, like how we care for ourselves, how we care for our colleagues, how we care for our teams. I'm not sure what we call that exactly, as it starts to show up in competency models. Maybe something like compassionate care as an example. But we're facing too much burnout and too much change fatigue to not elevate this as a competency in organizations moving forward. And I honestly think the workforce is ready for it. They're recognizing it. You know, Gallup did a study that found that, I can't remember which study it was off the top of my head. I'll try to find it and send it to you if you wanna include it. But they found that the respondents in that particular study, 52% reported they had experienced a lot of stress the previous day. A lot of stress. And Gallup has also done research to show that managers are more likely to be burned out than non-managers, and they are feeling the impacts of stress and they are burned out. And so we're getting more and more data about stress and burnout, and we're having more and more conversations about mental health and about wellbeing. So I would say something in that kind of compassionate care realm will start to show up in more and more competency models. And that's the prediction I'm gonna go with.

– I love that. And you're so right when you were in that super high stress, burned out space and true burnout, your brain's hijacked,

right? We kind of know that stuff about brain health, right? Like your speech is hijacked, your ability to interpret speech is hijacked. You know, you're kind of beyond flight or fight. You're in, like give up mode.

— Yeah.

— There's another f word for it. I can't think of it off the top of my head, but yeah, there's so much there. So I definitely think I agree. We're gonna see more around this idea of care and businesses and how that's impacting our view on talent development.

— Yeah.

— Heather, this was such a great discussion. I'm glad that you were able to jump on the podcast with me for a few minutes today.

— Yeah, thank you for having me.

— [Announcer] I hope you enjoy today's episode. You can find show notes and links at the HR mix, hey.com. Come back often and please subscribe, rate, and review.