

HR Mixtape podcast | Hosted by Dr. Shari Simpson | Guest: Will Ortiz-Febus, HR Healing Advocate, Beyond HR podcast

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.

Dr. Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Will Ortiz-Febus, HR Healing Advocate at Beyond HR podcast. Will shines a light on the emotional labor of HR and how practitioners can protect their well-being while doing the work. William, thank you for jumping on the podcast with me today.

Will Ortiz-Febus: Thank you so much for having me.

Dr. Shari Simpson: So I love that you sit in this space that I love to refer to as HR for HR. You know, as an HR pro and a podcast host, you know, really what made you want to talk about HR and their mental health specifically? Not a lot of people are talking about that.

Will Ortiz-Febus: For sure, definitely. I think whenever, even the way you phrased the question for me, it's like, it's not even about their mental health, it's about my mental health. Being a professional in the space, I think, you know, kind of like yourself, I've been in HR for a little over 20 years as well. Came into the profession by accident, like I feel like a lot of HR people do. You know, one of the things that I've learned in my healing process, looking and exploring mental health, has been that, you know, being the eldest of three in the family, being one of the first ones that learned English as a second language and was the one that was constantly helping the family communicate in doctor's appointments and things like that. I had this very early on need to want to help people. somehow HR found me and here I am getting to live professionally what I was doing as a kid. I did though as I was growing in the profession come to see and understand that there's the HR can be very lonely. in how we do things, especially when you're a department of one and there's so much expectations out of you. And a lot of times you get

kind of squished in the sandwich in between, you know, executives, they want things in a certain way and employees, they want to kind of push back and you're kind of that middle person trying to find that balance between the two. It could definitely take a huge mental toll on you because A lot of times, it feels like everybody's against you, even though you're trying to fight for everybody. And nobody sometimes gets that. So I think for myself, identifying that early on in my life, both personally and professionally, and then all of a sudden, as I was aware of myself, I saw the need for other HR professionals in exactly the same spot. And it would just come up in random conversations that we would have. And a lot of times I would just reach out to mentors or peers and be like, oh man, I'm having a really bad day today. Like I'm, I'm trying to stay positive. I'm trying to do what I can to help my employees. But man, I really just want to cuss at somebody right now. And I know I shouldn't. Um, that's not, that's not very HR-like, right? And then as those conversations were happening, I started realizing that more and more, it was a theme, a common theme for a lot of folks in our space, that we're struggling. We have our own therapists behind the scenes that nobody's aware of that we're talking to, or really close friends that we need to vent to. And unfortunately, some of the things that we have to vent about are things that are, you know, HIPAA protected, and we can't really talk to anybody else but other HR people with. So yeah, that kind of was one of my first moments of awareness to where there's so much information out there for HR professionals, compliance, how do we implement HIPAA, how do we implement ADA, how do we implement FMLA, but there's hardly any conversations about how can we help ourselves, ground ourselves in our job, in our space, so that we can be a better vessel for other people, because you can't pour from an empty cup, and that's just the crux of it, pretty much.

Dr. Shari Simpson: Why do you think this mental health crisis in the HR field is such a hidden topic?

Will Ortiz-Febus: I think mental health as a whole is hidden. No, I say that with the understanding that it's gotten better in both the general society norm and the specific professional norm. As I have more conversations like this with people, I see that there are a lot of folks that are trying to push that positive

narrative of there's something wrong with talking about mental health in HR. I think for myself, my background, I was originally born in Puerto Rico, moved over to the state of mainland USA in my mid-teens. And in our culture, you don't talk about mental health. Like you, if you have an issue, you pray about it or you, you know, brush it off. So even the concept of mental health for myself was something that I learned when I moved to mainland America or USA and started exposing myself to other people. Now pushing that into the professional side, I think there's an expectation, I don't think, I know there's an expectation that HR somehow has to have everything put together because we're the ones that make sure that the systems work. So That, for me, my personal experience, it gets in your head because then you're like, well, I need to have everything for everyone else. I need to hold the space for employees that are having issues. I need to hold the space for angry folks that come in here and holler at you and yell at you because things aren't working out. How do I do that if I don't have my own crap put together? And yeah, so when you're operating with that internal conflict that you need to look like you have things put together, but you don't, then if anything else that perpetuates that site go inside of you to where it's like, man, I must be a really crappy HR person that I can't get my crap together. You know, I must not be as good or as effective. I think I am because I'm over here having this facade of someone else telling them, oh, everything's gonna be great. Things are gonna be worked out, you know. But within myself, my own life is in crumbles, you know, and I can even go down the route like I'm, I'm a recovering, you know, alcoholic. And one of the things that I always tell people is like, we have found a way in the profession to be able to justify, unfortunately, sometimes substance abuse, you know, the happy hours, let's go to happy hour. And, you know, not realizing that those things are ways that we have, unfortunately, in an unhealthy way found to vent and mask the things that we're going through ourselves.

Dr. Shari Simpson: It's important to identify those tools that you can use to protect yourself and to protect your own space. One of the things that was really hard for me to learn in my career was boundary setting. And that is, to me, one of the best tools that HR has available to them that they are woefully under-utilizing. How do you... How have you talked with HR professionals

about really implementing boundaries in a way that protects their team's well-being, but also doesn't drop service levels? Because there is that expectation from the business.

Will Ortiz-Febus: Definitely. There's an aspect of, and I say this with the understanding that I'm still figuring that part out. I don't have, I'm not an expert in that area at all, but I know for myself, being able to hold space for folks as they're unleashing and unburdening themselves in a way that For me, I create almost like an initial conversation. Hey, right now, you clearly look like you're upset and mad about something. Let's do this. I'm going to give you two minutes to unleash whatever it is that you need to unleash. Let's close the door. This is a safe space. Say what you got to say. But at the end of the day, we have to come up with a resolution together. You know, I can't solve this for you. And obviously the caveat is depending on the situation. I mean, if it's something that's like systemic or I need to update something, that's fine. But when it comes to like people conflict, I can't necessarily solve it for you if I want you to be part of this conversation as to how we can come up to the conclusion together. But let's just get whatever you need to get out of your system first. because we're not going to get to that space of clarity if you are coming at it from a horribly emotional state of mind. And also I feel like a big missing piece is the fact that unfortunately we still have a lot of improvement in operations to help operations understand the human aspect of humans, which should be common sense, but The, a lot of times we get to focus on, we have goals to meet and deadlines to meet and things that we have to get done at the end of the day that we kind of put aside the aspect of, you know, they're humans that are operating in these roles to begin with. So being able to educate leaders in the business is super important. And then being able to identify leaders that are willing to be educated, because that's the other caveat to it. You can, you know, you can take the horse to the water, you can't make a drink. So as a hiring practices and the hiring process being able to identify folks that are a lot more emotionally intelligent to be present with their workforce so that you can have those conversations with them from the management perspective of, hey, we need to do the best that we can to support our employees emotionally so that can be the best version of themselves for us. but then also having that space in conversations with the

employees of, hey, instead of constantly coming up with things that aren't working, help us trying to figure out what can we do to make it better since you're the one that's doing the job to begin with.

Dr. Shari Simpson: That emotional intelligence is such a good skill to look for in the hiring process. And we also are left with managers that we have now, right? Maybe you haven't implemented that type of review in your hiring process yet. As you think about this function of HR, how can we help teach our business leaders how best to support us instead of treating HR like the service desk?

Will Ortiz-Febus: Yeah, I mean, that's a really, really good question. I think it's one that's been in the books forever. How can we present value as an HR department towards seeing more than just a, you know, a cost center and actually a profit center? That challenge lies with being able to allow management to see the, almost like quantifying the effect of having good emotionally intelligent practices. You know, one of the examples that I come up with is attendance policies. You know, being able to portray to the operations, hey, our attendance policy might not be as flexible as we should have it. Understanding that things do happen. Yes, we have, you know, point systems and things like that, but being able to say, hey, is there a way that we can redirect the essence of this policy to where it doesn't seem so disciplinary and more supportive to our employees? What would that look like? Would it be, you know, allowing employees to switch shifts with each other? So instead of saying, if you can't come to work, you're going to get a point. Well, if you can find something to cover for you, which sounds like very common sense, but sometimes we get so caught up in our processes. If somebody can switch the shift for you, then it's okay. We'll figure it out. or, you know, being able to come up with other out of the box ideas that, again, things that are in progress, to be able to allow that kind of flexibility and having a human process to, or rather a human base to the processes. That way we were able to navigate that a little better. So, but like I said, I think over time, everything, everything does, show itself the way it's meant to. It's just a matter of being patient in the process and just kind of throwing little bits and seeds and pieces here and there so that folks can kind of look at it from their perspective.

Dr. Shari Simpson: It's so true that sometimes we get stuck in the process or the guideline we created or the whatever, like it has to be done this way, that we forget to take that step back and go, okay, are we just doing process to do process? What actually makes sense and what's actually going to create good employee experience with the end result of having business impact. Because I think we might have overflexed a little bit in talking about employee experience, kind of agnostic of business impact. And that's, you know, that's really the bottom line. Your organization exists to make money, obviously, if you're in that space, not necessarily nonprofit. But I think about the gamut of HR professionals and the differences that they have in different industries. And I'm curious about specifically that manufacturing frontline environment where HR is truly in the trenches. What unique stressors do you see showing up there that might not be the same for an HR professional that's in that knowledge worker space?

Will Ortiz-Febus: Oh, man. I know in my experience, a lot of the stressors have been being that on-call mentality, like you're on call 24-7. If something goes down at 3 in the morning, you might get that phone call, that message, an email. That's definitely been a space where being able to, kind of going back to the prior question, create somewhat of a boundary around that as an HR professional and say, hey, I'm available, however, please make sure that's something that has to need immediate attention. And also having that layer of being able to train. I think that's something that we can all do better is train our management, you know, floor level folks to be able to address the first aid kind of scenarios that may not need an immediate HR support in that moment. I think sometimes, I know from my personal experiences, empathy sometimes can be a little bit of a stressor. There are times that I have to be able to step back a minute and say, you might be a little too emotionally involved in the situation. You know, to your point there, at the end of the day, we do have a business to run. Not, not to take away from the fact that you don't want to think about the human involved, but there are times that, you know, we might get a little too, too involved to where their problem becomes our problem, their emotions become our emotions, next thing you know, you're kind of stuck in that, in that rut of, you know, how do I, how can I better equip this employee to process what's happening versus me doing it for them.

Understanding again that there's a business that we have to run so that that happy balance between the two is definitely key and important and again something that never ends and as far as being able to develop that part of us.

Dr. Shari Simpson: Oh, for sure. HR really is the great empowerment in so many ways for leadership and for employees. You know, if you're listening to this and you're in that HR leadership space, you know, you have a team of HR professionals underneath you. What are some of the warning signs that they should be looking at for their team? And these might be kept in obvious because we coach our managers on this, but I do think there's something specific to that HR group that it does show up a little bit differently. So what are you seeing as you coach, you know, those at the C-level in the HR space, how to watch out for their own team?

Will Ortiz-Febus: Disengagement is the first one. And there's subtle ways to identify that. You know, that employee that's always been the above and beyond, all of a sudden doesn't seem so above and beyond. You know, they used to, you know, their job was, let's just say, to oversee compensation for some, this is a big department, so they have one person for each department, right? And all of a sudden, they were constantly helping out with learning and development and coming up with ideas for learning and development and whatnot. And all of a sudden, it's like, ah, if it's not my responsibility, I'm just going to stick to this. There's that initial inkling that we need to have of asking why and not assuming that it's because of fill in the blank. I think I'm a big proponent on asking why before assumptions and approaching that individual and having that conversation. Hey, you know what, Tim? I noticed the other day that, you know, You haven't been as vocal or as involved in the meetings as you normally are. Is everything going okay? Is everything going well? Is there something I can help with? What do you need from me? So I think this engagement is definitely number one. Mood changes, as weird as it sounds, as simple as it sounds, but I feel like just random mood changes and things that maybe upset somebody or that didn't upset people, randomly do. I feel like also a recent one that I've kind of started looking at for my, where I'm currently employed at and working, watching employee attendance randomly, just kind of those peaks and valleys where maybe they used to have perfect

attendance for three or four years and all of a sudden they're missing a lot of work. And again, asking why. If there's a medical issue, then that's different. But a lot of times being able to have those conversations like, you know, I just seen a mental health day. Like usually if I hear that, I'm like, okay, there's something bigger behind the scenes. Let me maybe not dig deeper right now because it's not the moment, but let me circle back later on and say, hey, you know, I saw, I know that early in the week we're talking about it and you took a day off last week because you needed some mental health break. What's going on? Is there anything that, you know, you need to get off your chest or things that we can talk about? And just being present and having those kind of conversations, be willing to have the conversations. But the groundwork has to be set early so it doesn't seem like you're investigating people. And I think that's that relationship that you have to have with your employees and with your peers and your subordinates within the HR department for sure.

Dr. Shari Simpson: And it's a good time for leaders to have those prioritization conversations. I think you touched on this earlier that, you know, HR has this mentality that we kind of have to be all the things, do all the things, be buttoned up. And part of that comes from everything that gets put on our plate, we feel like we have to execute to excellence. And there might be some scenarios as you work with your leadership that says, hey, you know what, this thing, we can execute it 70%. I love the 100%, but like what we're being asked might be 70%. And that's something that we can get off our plate and move on. I think we miss those opportunities sometimes to have prioritization conversations, not just internally inside of our HR teams, but with our business leaders when they do come to us and they're like, this is the most urgent priority. Well, you know, if you have some of that common business language, you can go back to the company goals and say, OK, well, this is what the company has decided to work on this quarter. Your particular thing, while great, actually doesn't align with what we're trying to do as a business. So, you know, how can I help you? to the capacity that I have, but the reality is that we are prioritizing these other things. A lot of times those conversations don't happen. So I love that you shared that listening and thinking because that curiosity can help you uncover some of that and create some prioritization. You know, as we wrap up our conversation, kind of the last question I'd like to

ask you is, You know, for those that are in HR who are feeling this right now, who maybe are in HR Department 1 or don't have somebody in their organization that they can collaborate, vent, you know, brainstorm with, what are some ways that you think that they can tap into the larger HR community to really gain some of that camaraderie that they're looking for?

Will Ortiz-Febus: For sure, for sure. And I'm about to do a shameless plug. So, you know, with our podcast, one of the things that we're doing with the Beyond the Chart podcast is attempting to do just that, create a bigger community where folks can tap into and talk to other people without feeling the strain of, you know, self-judgment or feeling like they're breaking some kind of law kind of thing. But I think that putting that aside, they're definitely, you have to be willing as an HR professional, which is a space I found myself in, to create that community yourself. I think LinkedIn, for me, LinkedIn has been a huge space to do that. Not just because it's readily available and, you know, everybody, there's some anonymity behind being, you know, anonymous in the screen with a picture instead of having to have conversations like this. But you're able to tap into not just different regional differences and support, but across the world. I mean, I've talked to people from the UK, from California, from, you know, some other countries. I can't think of anything on top of my head right now. But being able to have those kind of conversations and make it your purposeful, intentional action to reach out. I think for me that it's changing that mentality from whoa, whoa is me to I'm going to do something about it was very pivotal for myself. And that's how I'm in this space and how I get the pleasure of meeting you and having conversations with amazing people is you have to be willing to make that action. And so you know what, enough is enough, like with everything in life. The action of staying here has to be more uncomfortable than the action of actually doing something about it. There's a saying about that. I think I just butchered, but the concept of it is that I have to feel uncomfortable enough to be in the space that I'm in, both in my job and my mind and what I'm doing. And that needs to be the thing that propels me to reach out to talk to people and have that space. So yeah, I think that it's never too late. Nowadays, AI can help you create an introductory email if you want or a message to send to people. I would encourage folks to at least once a week. You know, we

reached out to five people that they have never met, either online or in their community. Obviously, there's different organizations such as CHIRM, HRCI. There's, you know, UPUP. There's a really cool one that I've been following recently. Can't think of them off the top of my head right now. But they're also trying to create those same, you know, community bases. to be able to have HR people get together and redefine our industry because, you know, it's time to do it, you know. And one of my own personal catchphrases is, you know, I truly firmly believe the HR has the sacred responsibility to be healers of the workplace. And it has to start with us. We have to be able to take care of ourselves and our own mental health, our own emotional well-being. our soul and spirituality, if that's something that calls to you, to be able to be that grounding space for other people. Because if we're not able to do it for ourselves, then how can we function in the way that we're meant to for those that are around us and that we're responsible for?

Dr. Shari Simpson: William, it was such a great conversation. It's so awesome to hear your passion for other HR professionals. It's something we definitely share. And, you know, for those listening, William and I are connectors. So if you see us on LinkedIn, send us a connection request. We definitely love talking to this community and helping to support each other. So make sure you find us both on LinkedIn. We'd love to connect. So William, again, thank you for taking a few minutes of your day to sit and chat with me.

Will Ortiz-Febus: Of course, thank you so much and keep pushing forward because this is the kind of conversation that we need. So thank you so much again.

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.