HR Mixtape: Hosted by Shari Simpson with Guest Lily Zheng, FAIR Strategist and Consultant at Zheng Consulting

Announcer:

You're listening to 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 Lily Zheng, FAIR strategist and consultant at Zheng Consulting. Lily helps organizations build FAIR, measurable workplace practices that hold up under pressure and create real outcomes. Lily, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

Lily Zheng:

Yeah, thanks so much for having me. I'm looking forward to this one.

Shari Simpson:

So I'm curious what pulled you towards DEI as a systems and outcomes problem because so many times I think we talk about it from like a good intentions perspective.

Lily Zheng:

Yeah, yeah. Well, I spend a lot of time describing myself as a problem solver. And so when I work with people, right, I want to understand what's going on with them, what problems they're experiencing in the workplace, and then I want to fix them. I want them to go into work the next day with a better experience than they had today. And I think very quickly within this line of work, I think I realized that the sources of people's problems were much bigger than just the small little things you could fix by learning a new word or

using a new phrase or just being a little more mindful, right? Like people weren't saying like, oh, you know, if only I knew the five niche phrases to avoid being a bad person. You know, if I just knew those, I could just totally fix racism. That's not how that works, right? The problems that people were facing were structural. So they were dealing with lack of pay. They were dealing with lack of policies, lack of processes. They were dealing with a status quo that was just not designed for people like them. And so you can't kind of good intentions your way through that, right? You need to use stronger tools to fix these kinds of deeply ingrained problems in our workplaces. And those tools are change management, structural change, right? We need to start asking about things like how do we influence policy? How can we shift, you know, widely held norms and beliefs about how it is we work together? And that's deeper work, right? So that's kind of my approach. Not just good intentions, right? It's not just teaching people the individual little tricks to try to be a better person, but working together with everyone to roll our sleeves up and to build better workplaces.

Shari Simpson:
And that plays very well into the perspective of these initiatives shouldn't be agnostic of some of the business processes that we already kind of know and utilize. So I love that you mentioned, you know, things like pay equity and looking at those things and making sure that you are taking that approach. You know, one of the reasons I was so excited to talk to you is you just launched a book and you sent around this concept of fixing fairness, right? So I'd love if you could share a little bit about what does fairness mean to you in the workplace and what doesn't it mean?

Lily Zheng:
Yeah, yeah. So fairness to me, right? This is such a guiding principle behind the book. And in the few years before writing it, it came up over and over again in conversations with workers and leaders across the country. I think, you know, it's fair to say that people in the U.S. and around the world, we don't all agree on things like DEI, right, diversity, equity, inclusion, and on how it is we design our workplaces. But it turns out quite a few people do agree that we want workplaces that give everyone a fair shot, that level the playing

field, that give everyone opportunity to succeed. And so when you look at the current workplace, the status quo, right, here's a wild statistic that I love asking people to guess about. Can you guess, can you guess for me, what percent of American workers have experienced discrimination in the workplace?

Shari Simpson:
Oh, I'm going to guess 85%.

Lily Zheng:
Okay. Pretty good. 91.

Shari Simpson:
91. It's pretty much everyone, right? Like if you've never been discriminated against, you are very lucky. And so we kind of operate in this world where despite our best intentions, and I would say some people aren't even intending to be fair in the first place, but despite our best intentions, we don't have workplaces that recognize our skill, that treat us fairly, that treat us respectfully, that give us the resources we need to succeed. We have problems, our workplaces have problems. And so the fundamental premise of this book, Fixing Fairness, is to move away from this is DEI good, is DEI bad conversation into a much more practical place of your workplace is broken and we need to fix it, right? It doesn't matter if it's quote-unquote more broken for you than it is for the person next to you or more broken for them. We're not, you know, playing oppression Olympics here, right? Like it's not a competition. We all have workplaces that don't meet our needs. And to fix them, we need to work together. We need to get really honest about how it is our workplaces are broken, are not working. And then we need to use what we know from research, from best practice, to shape our workplaces for the better together.

Shari Simpson:
So many HR leaders get this wrong? And I'm not coming down on anybody because I think it can be complicated, but I have seen so many DEI efforts stall, create untrusting environments. You'll have backlash from them. Why

does that keep happening in our organizations? Why do HR leaders, who I know are passionate about, you know, having the fairness in their organizations, still just not meeting the mark with this?

Lily Zheng:
I work with a lot of HR leaders and the folks I work with are some of the kindest, most thoughtful people who I know. And they all tend to have a very similar Achilles heel, if you will, right? A very similar shortcoming. And that one is they're a little naive when it comes to the actual state of the workplace. There was a study that came out, I want to say it was in 2022-2023, asking both workers in their companies and the HR leadership in their companies what percent of their initiatives were effective at changing the status quo, right? So they were saying like, to what extent are these DEI initiatives, these HR projects working to make a better workplace? So HR leaders, I think something like 90 plus percent said that they worked. Guess the percentage of non-HR leaders who said that they worked.

Shari Simpson:
I'm gonna go 25%.

Lily Zheng:
You're really good at this. Yeah, it was 30. It was 30, right? Huge gap. Huge gap. And I think, you know, I see this across the board. You talk to HR leaders and, you know, they're very kind. They'll say, oh yeah, you know, I made this initiative. I really want to help people. I know for a fact that it's helping people. And, you know, you ask them the questions, well, how do you know, right? Like, what metrics have you gathered? How do you understand? And some of the people I work with, they get a bit defensive. They're like, why are you questioning me, Lily? Of course I know. Of course it's helping. I see it. I see it every day. I know it's helping. And the stats show, it's really not. So this gap between our aspirational ideas about how effective our work is, and sometimes the harsh reality can sometimes be at odds. And if there was anything I would talk to the HR leaders about who I work with, it's about going beyond our desire to see ourselves as good people and to ask ourselves, well, whether or not I'm a good person, because I know I am, is it working? It's not

personal if it's not working. It just means I need to be more rigorous. It means that I need to be more data focused. It means I need to be talking to my workers a little more, right? Because sometimes, look, workers put on their best face before they talk to HR. You all know this. I know this, right? Conversations get a little quieter when HR walks into the room. And if we are HR professionals, we have to know that. We have to anticipate that. We can't just take what people say to us at face value when they say, oh yeah, everything's fine here, there are no problems. They're just saying that because they don't want you to freak out, right? And going deeper takes a lot more effort and it's a lot more rewarding once we understand the actual challenges that workers are facing so that we can solve them.

Shari Simpson:
So you mentioned two things I want to kind of drill into and ask your perspective. So the first comes with metrics. You know, I think for a long time, DEI efforts have been focused specifically around metrics, right? And not necessarily the metrics I think have the most impact, right? So let's start there and then I'll go back to my other question. You know, what are the metrics that for lack of a better or a catchy phrase, what are the metrics that matter? Which are the ones we actually should be looking at?

Lily Zheng:
Yeah, yeah. Well, I will kind of go back to my first answer in this conversation, which is the only metrics that matter are those that help you solve problems for people. And that's it, right? Now, it really depends what problems your people have. If you are in a workplace where people don't collaborate much, they don't communicate much, you need to measure communication and collaboration. If you are in a workplace where people are really positive, but they never share critique or feedback, well, then you need to measure psychological safety. You need to measure feedback sharing. If you're in a workplace where, let's see, the men speak over the women all the time in every meeting. You need to be measuring speaking time as a metric for participation and engagement. Far from me saying here's a list of 50 metrics that you always have to measure, I think we can get in metric hell, right, of just talking about these infinite abstract ideas. Flip it on its head. What

problems do your people have and how do you measure those problems so that you can measure how to fix it? And you'll very quickly find that when you take this approach, it doesn't look like DEI work the way we've become maybe accustomed to doing it, right? Like I remember my very first role right out of college, I was 21. And I was designing DEI workshops. I was the metrics person. And, you know, that sounds good, that sounds accountable. And the only metrics I was collecting every single day was like, would you rate this workshop a four out of five? Like I was collecting data, yeah, in the sense that I was collecting numbers. Was it useful data? Absolutely not. It was junk data. They were vanity metrics. They weren't actually connected to people's real experiences. They weren't connected to real outcomes. They didn't matter. They only made us feel good about ourselves. So I think the question is not, should you collect data? Everyone collects data. It's 2026, right? The question instead is, are you collecting the right data? Are you asking the right questions? And then finally, are you doing anything with your data? Because I work with so many workplaces that collect terabytes of data and they just sit on their hands. They don't do a thing with it. And then their workers get really annoyed because they say, why did I go through all this effort of filling out survey after survey after survey if all you're going to do is to just send out another survey and not do anything about the last one? So there's so much better we can be doing.

Shari Simpson:
I love that you mentioned the problem of men speaking over women from the perspective of the metric then you talked about, right, speaking time. That seems like one of those like Captain Obvious things, but so many people I think don't take that approach going back to what is the problem we're trying to solve. So I love that you gave that example because that's such a good nugget to think about as, you know, HR professionals are trying to solve these problems. It's like, what is the problem and what is the metric specifically linked to the problem that we're trying to solve? So love that. You know, the other thing I was thinking about, as you were talking earlier, was around culture and psychological safety. And you hit on that just a few minutes ago, you know, to get to a point where I think HR needs to have these conversations or create an environment where it's safe to have these

conversations. I'd like to ask, where do you start with the psychological safety? I mean, I know we've talked actually a lot about this in the podcast because I'm pretty passionate about that topic in general. But from your perspective, you're just getting started down this road in a different way. How do you start with that psychological safety? How do you lean into that first?

Lily Zheng:

Yeah, well I want to start by saying psychological safety is probably one of the most misunderstood and complicated terms in this field. So for the purposes of answering this question, I'm actually going to translate it into a different term. I will instead call it good conflict. Because fundamentally, psychological safety is our feeling safe and secure enough to disagree, to take risks, to offer conflicting feedback, to challenge the status quo. It's not about feeling good and comfy all the time. It's about, in fact, feeling like we can engage in conflict safely. So now I'm gonna call it good conflict, because I think people can understand that a little more than psychological safety. So how do you build good conflict in the workplace, right? I think the first is changing and fighting our perhaps natural instinct to suppress what we don't like. And this is not just an HR thing or a leadership thing. I think this is a human thing. Conflict is uncomfortable. Nobody likes it. When people disagree with us, when people share an idea that conflicts with ours, we feel, what do we feel? We feel threat. We feel challenge. We feel anxiety. It's a somatic response. Your palms get sweaty when people call you out. It's a very physical thing. And I think the challenge for people doing, you know, human-centered work, people-centered work, HR work, whatever, is to design practices, shared practices in the workplace that help everyone interrupt our natural human instinct to shut down the source of the threat. And maybe that means by incentivizing it, by saying like, hey, in every single meeting, we're going to maybe assign someone to be a devil's advocate. We're going to assign someone to share critical ideas. Maybe that person's going to rotate. Or maybe we're going to have our leaders specifically share stories about times in which they were wrong, or share stories about times in which someone on their team spoke up to correct them, to offer a new insight. These things take time. No one practice will fix psychological safety or good conflict in the workplace. But many of our workplaces are designed the exact opposite, if we're being

honest. We have workplaces where if you speak up, your leaders will punish you. If you speak up, people will give you that look and then they'll have a meeting after the meeting to berate you about it. Unfortunately, sometimes even HR can participate in this process. If HR leaders have just learned that the rules of the workplace are that you don't disagree with the boss, and then they go ahead and enforce those rules, well then they become part of that problem. So if you are an HR leader, I think it probably starts with being honest with yourself about what is the status quo in the workplace? How safe is it? And if you can't answer that question easily, how frequently do you see people speaking up and disagreeing? And if the answer, as it is in most of our workplaces, is, oh, not that often, then ask yourself, why are people not speaking up? It's not because they have nothing to share. People always have something to share. So why are they not speaking up? Are they scared? Have they been punished? Have they given up? Have they lost hope? Are they just disengaged? Do they not trust their leadership? And then once we've identified those problems, well, then we fix them. If people are disengaged, we need to find ways to engage them. People don't trust their leadership, we need to rebuild that trust. So again, everything goes back to this problem-solving approach, right?

Shari Simpson:
You know, one of the questions I had planned to ask you had to do with, you know, how do you make the case for budget for DEI initiatives? And the more we talk, I think I'd like to flip the question around and ask you, how do you encourage those that you work with to change the narrative around the term, and I'm using air quotes, DEI initiatives, unquote, right? Like, and now have a fairness conversation and now have the conversation that when I'm talking about budget, it's not for a DEI effort. It's for real business impact.

Lily Zheng:
Yes, yes. So this has been one of the biggest challenges that the field has faced in the last 20 years. And I think when you reframe the question a little bit, it becomes almost absurd the way we've been talking about it for so long. So for example, right, if I asked you, make a case for why I need to be spending money on ensuring that my workers stay with my company. What

kind of argument is that? Turnover is so expensive. Turnover is so expensive. It's what? 1.5 times someone's salary to fill a role. All the costs for retraining, hiring, onboarding, right? So if you are just going through people like a revolving door, that's clearly an awful business practice that you're currently doing. So yes, it behooves you to spend as much money as you can to keep the best talent working with you. And yet, you know, we apply so much scrutiny to DEI efforts specifically because we don't understand what outcomes they're trying to achieve, right? So if I had a very well-running program where I could say, look, because of these process changes, because of these resources that we're providing, because of this support that we're providing, we know for a fact that productivity is up, engagement is up, we have better ideas, we have good decisions being made, we're retaining the top talent, right? This is really helping. That's one thing. Now, what leaders instead hear is, well, you're putting on an event and the event costs $1,000. Should it cost $1,000? Maybe we could spend a little less, right? That second conversation is entirely divorced from outcomes, from impact, from anything. And so obviously, if you just have your $1,000 event floating in the void and leaders are looking for something to cut, you can say goodbye to that event, right? It's completely divorced from the outcomes we're trying to shift. This is why I think framing everything in terms of problem solving is so critical. So you can say, look, this isn't just an event. We're doing all of this because we want to help our teams make better decisions. If you're asking me to justify the cost of doing better in the workplace, then I can just flip the question back. How expensive is it for us to be making bad decisions? How expensive is it for us to be bleeding top talent? How expensive is it for us to be fielding discrimination claims and lawsuits? The status quo costs something. And so, unless we're aware of those costs, sometimes we can even trick ourselves into thinking that the very solutions that we're trying to field are more risky than the status quo that's been getting us in trouble this entire time. And I think that's one of the biggest pitfalls that I find when I do this work. People underestimate the cost of nothing.

Shari Simpson:
For sure. I couldn't agree more. You know, Lily, this has been such a great conversation. And I guess my last question will be, you know, if there's one

thing that you want our listeners to walk away with in this space to do differently, right? Their one big nugget takeaway, what would that be?

Lily Zheng:

Stop doing it by yourself. So I think this work is so collective and really involves some tough conversations. It involves good conflict. And so if we're just kind of hiding away in our little tower, trying to make good decisions for other people, we inevitably get it wrong. We inevitably have bad conflict, right? Because we're not in conversation with the workers, with our colleagues, with the leaders who we work with. And so even if it's uncomfortable, I'll challenge you to be taking these conversations out of the shadows and saying, look, let's talk about compensation. Let's talk about promotion processes. Let's put all the rules out on the table and ask ourselves, is this the way things should be? Is this working for people? Do we have any problems? and have that broader conversation with our leadership, with our managers, with our employees, with our colleagues, and do that work together, even if you can't control the outcome, even if you can't control the process. Will it be scary? Yeah, you'll be terrified, right? And like, that's the process of getting to better, right? That's the process of building better. We have to be brave enough to create this kind of good conflict, to create these environments that allow us to be our best selves and to do good work. And I think that's just the takeaway behind this book and this work. I think workplaces everywhere are moving in this direction already. We need more rigor. But at the same time, we need more collective decision making. We need more, you know, collective creation of the kinds of changes that our workplaces need.

Shari Simpson:

Such a great takeaway, Lily. Thank you so much for taking some time to sit down and chat with me about this very important topic.

Lily Zheng:

Thanks so much for having me.

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.