

# HR Mixtape: Episode with Shari Simpson featuring Tracy Austin, Chief Talent Officer at Elevated Talent Consulting

## **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 Tracy Austin, Chief Talent Officer at Elevated Talent Consulting. Tracy helps organizations strengthen leadership and talent strategies, especially in frontline and skilled trades environments. Tracy, thank you so much for being on the podcast again with me.

## **Tracy Austin:**

Thank you for having me. I am really excited about this topic because it's one I was just sharing before we got started that I don't think I've covered enough and or I actually don't hear a lot of other podcasts in the HR space talk about this and what we're going to focus on is the trades and those types of roles. So I guess we'll start here. When you think about the different trades and you think about people leaving or staying, what are some of kind of the common misconceptions we have about, you know, why people decide to go into the trades and why they decide to leave for something else?

## **Shari Simpson:**

Yeah, absolutely. So why do folks decide to go into the trades? There are so many misconceptions around this. And, you know, some of them are, you know, the trades are for folks that, you know, can't go to a four-year school or for folks that don't have the ability to do other things. And that is so false. I mean, when you look at the trades right now and the dollar amounts that are

being paid for folks in the trades, whether that's plumbing, whether that's electrician, whether that's a framing, whether that is a heavy equipment operator, you know, you're looking at six plus figure positions. And that's something that's definitely a misconception. One of the things with the trades right now is AI is not going to take over your electrician in a commercial building or in your home. AI is not going to take over the plumbing putting your toilet in. So these hands-on trades are so incredibly important and in a way Trades are, there's an art form to it. Whether you're looking at a heavy equipment operator that's looking at grading and how they're doing different things out in the field, it is very much an art form that is a lot of times passed down from individual to individual. And it takes that experience to do that. And so this misnomer around education is completely false within the trades and the dollar amount that folks can make is significant.

**Tracy Austin:**

I think the dollar amount thing, I completely agree. I have not, I have heard that argument before where people are like, oh, well, you can't make as much money. And I'm like, well, you're just, you're not informed because that's actually not the case anymore. Especially if you are in a trade that's unionized, you have that entire backing and pipeline and some of those things that come with it. When you've worked with people to help them understand that the way that they manage people in the trades is just as important as the way we manage people in not the trades, right? Those leaders also need leadership development, but I think it looks differently. So how are you working with organizations to paint that picture of, hey, it's just as important as it is in any other organization, but it might look differently for the way it's executed in your organizations?

**Shari Simpson:**

Yeah. You know, and a lot of times what we see is it's really important to meet people where they're at. You know, in trade organizations, folks are out on job sites. They're out on the roadways. You know, their office looks very, very different and it changes significantly based on the time of year or where they're at. You know, it's like there's folks that are laid off from Christmas through March, you know, and they absolutely love that. Yeah, and there's

some folks that don't love that and go to try to find something different and end up kind of hopping between different employers. That doesn't have to happen, right? But kind of going back to the leadership in the trades and how that's different, it's when we meet folks where they're at for conversations, for checking in, for one-on-one, they're in their environment that's comfortable. The second we call them into the job trailer, the second we call them into the office, it's like, oh, gee, something's going to happen, which is that the same when we're in an office environment? Yeah, but it's very different in the fact that they're working in a completely different environment. And the thing that is similar is it's based on relationships. And that relationship piece is so incredibly important. Like when I'm working in manufacturing, those supervisors are on the floor. They're walking around, right? When we're working in trades, when we've got 50 different jobs that we're running, guess what? There are superintendents out there, yes, or foremen, but you don't typically have as much kind of on-site time with folks as you do in other areas. There's jobs where you may only have two or three people on it, especially when we're looking at folks, let's say, in landscaping or in fencing and some of those things, you're sending out chignon crews. And so you don't necessarily have that face time or that hands-on mentoring that you get in other areas. And that's what makes it a little bit different. So what are the skills that those leaders need? And I guess, how do we think about developing them? Because I think about, you know, when I've been in manufacturing before, one of the challenges I had in talking to those on the floor who wanted more, right? They wanted either to be a people manager, they wanted to have, you know, more scope. One of the most hurdles that we had to deal with is finding the time to carve out, to give them that type of training that they need, because they are hands-on, right? They're doing the job, and they have to learn alongside it. So how are you helping HR leaders think differently? Because that's what I had to do, right? I had to think differently about how I executed training and development and what that looked like. What are some of your recommendations there?

**Tracy Austin:**

Yeah, absolutely. And I love this, right? Because in manufacturing, you can now have training where it's actually on the machine that it's walking you

through it, right? We're not that far yet with technology that we can do that in all of them. I think it's coming, and that is definitely a beauty of AI, right? So one of the things that we've really focused on is first and foremost, we looked at how do people learn? And so, you know, what's been found is 70% of the learning happens on the job, right? 20% of that learning happens like hand over hand, almost mentoring. It's still on the job, like you're still there. And 10% is in a normal training environment, right? And so when we look at those three different areas, and we look at what do folks need, this is where those two-man crews that are going out, we're saying, okay, so that first person might be one just coming in, and that second person may be there a year. So how do we, over the course of that first year, really instill what we need that person to know? And guess what? That's going to be through, we call these mentoring programs. And what that is, is essentially we have exactly our processes laid out. We know exactly what winning looks like, right? It's not just putting up a fence, right? That's not it. It is very specific surround, and I'm just using this as an example. How we do that, how we clean it up, how deep that is, the concrete, all of the different things that go into that so that there's measurables around what winning looks like. It's not just about the quality of the craftsmanship. It's also what is that interaction with a homeowner or with a business? What does the cleanup after look like, right? Because when we have clarity in our expectations and we have those early check-ins in that first 90 days, that's going to instill here's our culture, here's our expectations throughout the length of that employee with the organization. So we've got a great onboarding program. We couple that with training for that person as they're shifting into kind of the lead in our two-man crew that still has folks that are checking in. The biggest thing that we see when I'm talking to trade organizations and working within them is I said, hey, how often have you gone out and talked to Johnny? Oh, man, I haven't been on a site with Johnny in a year. OK, why? Right. So, you know, I don't like calling them trainers, but that supervisor that really their job is being out on site. And sometimes in a way it's like, hey, what do they do? They just go on site with folks every single day, different ones. They're mentoring. They're seeing how things are going. They're checking in. They're asking questions, they're giving feedback that

hand over hand that it's much easier to get when we're all in one place than it is when we're completely spread out.

**Shari Simpson:**

For sure. And you mentioned culture. And I'm chuckling because I have worked in local government before. I have been fortunate enough to work in a fire department and it has a very specific culture. So I'm going to kind of use that as my example. And there is a level of camaraderie that gets developed in those organizations. And there's this level of toughness or this is the way we do it. And so when I think about culture and I think about what we know about feedback and recognition and how that impacts retention, but I marry that with this tough it out mentality or like this is just the job, like this is how we're supposed to do it. How do we start to break that barrier so that, you know, I don't think it's that these scenarios, these people don't want the recognition. It's just that the culture hasn't allowed it. How do we change that?

**Tracy Austin:**

Yeah. And so, I think first and foremost, we need to figure out what folks actually want. And, you know, we use something called predictive index. I know that that's built into Paylocity now, which is so exciting. But with that being said, you know, knowing what folks want, and sometimes it's just as simple as asking them, not asking them when they're in a group of 50 people, asking them when it is that one-on-one, like, hey, what do you really want? Here's what I saw today, and you did a phenomenal job on those things. And sometimes it is that receiving it that we all have a really hard time with. And so how does that change? It changes through the visibility of it changing from our leaders, right? And so if our leaders aren't taking that on, guess what? Our folks aren't taking it on either. And so that's definitely something to look at, you know, and metrics are important. And so often we focus on the negatives. We didn't hit this. We didn't hit that. That went bad. You know, if we shift our narrative and one of the easiest ways to do that is start your morning meetings with a win. Hey, what was a win yesterday? Like that is one of the easiest ways to shift it is, hey, what was a win yesterday? Or, you know, if you have folks that come back to the office before they leave, whether they're cleaning out their trucks or whatever that is, you know, hey, what went well

today? Our questions have tremendous power to them. And so sometimes it's as simple as changing what our questions are, because it's going to change the culture and the results.

**Shari Simpson:**

I love that, especially because a lot of these organizations are heavily safety and compliance driven. So they have a lot of pressure in that space where they don't have wiggle room. We don't have necessarily the same opportunities to have progressive conversations when it comes to safety and compliance in some of these scenarios. So being able to ask the questions that help uncover some of those things, I absolutely love that. There's a way to be curious and not condescending, right? There's a way to be curious and celebrate the things that we know that people are doing well and are having an impact on things. How do you, in that safety environment, or how have you helped leaders understand that psychological safety in that environment looks a little bit different, meaning that what we want is to create an environment where people feel safe to tell us about unsafe things. Correct. It's a little bit different. How have you coached leaders to develop that skill? Because they are often seen as like, hey, I, you know, got to do this. My manager's coming. Like, I can't screw this up. I don't want to show them that like I have done something unsafe. But the same aspect, it's like you said, you know, you might have a leader who's in charge of 40 sites. They don't know everything that's happening. Right. Right. And we don't want performance or performative only when somebody shows up, right?

**Tracy Austin:**

Yeah. So there's kind of two things here. And one of them is I like to ask a number of questions. So let's say I'm out and I see something that's unsafe, right? Instead of me saying, hey, that's unsafe. What are you doing? I might say, hey, tell me a little bit about your environment. What's working within this environment? What's not working with this environment? What do you see? Because when we can get curious and go the route of coaching questions, does this take longer to get to the point? Yes, it does. And I'm just going to name it. It 100% does. Yet, what it does is it is embedding thinking in the individuals that you're talking to versus just giving the answers. So let's say

that they don't have their harness on or their harness isn't connected in the right way. We can say, hey, tell me about your environment. Tell me about this. What happens? You know, hey, I just saw you go up to on the roof with this. Tell me about that situation. If they're not getting it, I'm going to say, hey, there's a couple of things I noticed. Do you have any idea of what I noticed before I name it? Because I much rather have you tell me than me tell you, because that's going to build trust within this. Because if we have an ownership mindset, which it could be, or integrity or whatever those key core values are, we can build that in with our questioning. I'd always rather have them come up with it and then have a conversation of, hey, so, yep, I heard you just say you didn't clip in. Tell me a little bit about why. What was the barrier to clipping in? And let's talk about it. Because now I'm trying to get an understanding as to what is the barrier to that that has them not doing it, especially when I'm here, versus when I'm not. Because if I can understand that and what's behind it, now we have the opportunity to actually brainstorm to solve the problem. Well, hey, it's X, Y, Z happens within that. And I actually feel it's more unsafe when I do it this way. I feel like it takes me an extra five minutes and I'm getting the pressure over here. Right. Whatever that is, now we can have an open and honest conversation about it. It doesn't mean the answer is going to be you don't have to do it. Right. You know, we still have to follow what the rules are, but if I can understand what's behind it first, there may be another way of doing it, or it may be something super simple that they don't know yet that will make this easier. So that's one way that we look at it.

**Shari Simpson:**

Well, and it ties in a little bit to that idea around design thinking. If you start to have those curiosity conversations and you find out that, like you shared, maybe using the harness in that way actually makes the person feel unsafe. Well, is that reality? Is it the wrong kind of harness? Is it the wrong environment? Is there other things you can put in place? You're never gonna get to be able to design those things if you can't get curious with those questions, so I love that. Exactly. I'm going to flip this a little bit. So you're having that conversation with somebody, and let's say they don't want to participate. I'm trying to play this out in my head, right? And the ideal

employee is sharing, and you're having these collaboration conversations. But there is also going to be that employee who's like, yeah, you caught me. I didn't do it. Write me up. How do you coach leaders to handle those moments?

**Tracy Austin:**

Yeah. So when we get the combative employee, right? And what I love about this is they're showing you who they are, but they're also showing you where there's a fear here, too. And so, hey, write me up. I didn't do it. I'm probably just going to kind of look at him and be like, I don't really want to write you up. There's probably another way to this. Do you want to play? Like, you know, and that's also my playful nature is like, I don't. My purpose of being here is not to write you up. I don't want to write you up. I want you to go home to your family. So is there another way that we can have this conversation? And then I just stop talking and like stare at them and wait for them to talk. That's often the best thing.

**Shari Simpson:**

Yes. What's one leadership trait that you have seen in the trades that needs to die because it's hurting their culture?

**Tracy Austin:**

Um, one of them is the yelling and that it's my way or the highway. Like, those are two that both need to die.

**Shari Simpson:**

Do you think that comes from these professions in general, not having the same sort of emotional intelligence training that we get kind of in the knowledge worker space?

**Tracy Austin:**

I think there's some of that, but I also think there is, you've got, you've got the old guard that typically the quality of their work is phenomenal, yet it is truly, you do it this way, I'm going to bark at you if you don't do these things. And it's causing this huge riff with this new generation coming in who's like, no, I'm I'm not doing that right like I'm not like that's not happening. Here's what I

typically find most of these, they're mostly guys or some gals, the big teddy bears once you can kind of get through what is there and some of that as you said earlier, is this. We have to be really hard, this is what we have to do kind of mentality. And so when we can understand what folks actually need and repeat it back to them, when we both want the same things, we have a want match, you know, got to figure out what do we both want, then how do we get there? So when we have a want match, we can 100% get there. Are there times where we have to 100% draw the line and say, we're setting a very firm boundary here that this behavior is no longer acceptable in this organization and here's the limit and the boundary of what happens if this continues? Absolutely. And that has to happen. And typically it only takes one to start to shift the culture because it's like, oh, we're not doing this anymore. Okay, you're right. So there is that, but I don't ever wanna kind of throw the whole thing out because there's a work ethic that is significant that we typically see with the older workforce that's there. And there's this craftsmanship that is typically beautiful because they truly see what they're doing as an art craft. And they figured out the flow of it, where that's taken them 30, 40, 50 years to do. And so it's this finesse almost of a dance of getting that transferred into our younger workers coming in while also integrating the technology, while also integrating sometimes a softer way kind of a being in those situations. So it's definitely an and both. There's not a one size fits all to this. But what is imperative is trust and building the relationships with the folks that are out there.

**Shari Simpson:**

All right. One last question. It's kind of a big one. You know, there has been a decline in attraction to these roles, to the trades, to the military, to public safety, public service, those types of roles. What are you recommending for HR professionals who are sitting in this space going, I just can't keep people in the door? How should we be advertising trade jobs differently now to attract the talent we need?

**Tracy Austin:**

You know, I truly believe it's experiential. You know, if we think about kind of what's happening within our middle schools and our high schools, what is

specifically happening of, I think about in my hometown, we've got, it's kind of like a touch the truck day, right? We've got something in our community called Hendricks CareerTech, which truly brings trades in every career, really into the middle schools and the high schools. It is giving them those experiences, having them go out in the field with folks, having them have that hands-on experiential training to it with saying, hey, here's a guy that's making \$170,000 a year in a non-union environment. Here's a guy making the same in a union environment. Here's the distinctions between union and non-union. Here's the distinctions specifically between a heavy equipment operator and a framer. Here's what those are, and here's some ways that you can do some hands-on to see what you actually like, right? So like the Crafts Know a Character program that is going across the country is beautiful for this. What's happening with our youth apprenticeship programs is phenomenal. So it really is those hands-on. So what I'd say to our HR folks is really get involved in these programs in your communities and really tap into the experiential piece, figure out how do we get our organizations involved to be in front of these young people. I don't just mean the job fair at the high school. I mean, how do you create opportunities for a 10-week internship over the summer to get the interest in it?

**Shari Simpson:**

I love that. And if you're listening and you're like, hey, my town doesn't have anything like that, go ahead and create it. I give you permission. It's one of the greatest things to be able to walk into a school or another business and say, hey, I'm working on this. I think it can elevate us both. Would you like to explore it with me? So I've had so much fun doing that in my career. So please feel free as listeners to take that on, because I think it's really good for you as a practitioner, but also for your organization. Tracy, as always, amazing conversation. You always bring such great insight and advice for those listening. So thanks for joining me.

**Tracy Austin:**

Thank you.

**Shari Simpson:**

I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at [thehrmixtape.com](http://thehrmixtape.com). Come back often and please subscribe, rate, and review.