

## HR Like a Boss: Transforming Work Culture with John Bernatovicz

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 John Bernatovicz author of HR Like a Boss and founder of Willery.

Shari Simpson: John, thank you so much for coming on the podcast again.

John Bernatovicz: Of course. So glad to be here, Shari. I think we did this once or twice before. And it's nothing like being at Sherm24 and doing a little podcasting with Paylocity and sharing the love for human resources. So thank you so much for having me.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. So we're gonna talk a little bit about your book and a little bit about other things. But let's start with the book.

What inspired you to write HR like a boss?

John Bernatovicz: Two things. Number one, I unfortunately lost both my parents in a short period of time and had one of those bucket list items that came to the top of the list of writing a book. And I really just wanted to inspire HR professionals to transform how people feel at work through the power of HR. I'm HR's greatest advocate. Some may argue Steve Brown is or others that are at this conference may want to throw down Taking that claim, but I really feel like the potential that HR has to really transform the way people feel at work. I keep saying those those that phrase because it means something to me and I hope it means something to people because at the end of the day, we spend so much time working. And unfortunately, engagement's down, satisfaction's down. Employees don't think employers care about them. There's a lot of data that points to we're just not doing a good enough job. And when I say we, I mean business leaders and HR professionals and everyone else. And I was hopeful that my book would inspire one person to change that. And then it changes 10 employees at their companies, experience, et cetera. That's really why I did it.

Shari Simpson: So you got to talk to a lot of HR professionals while you were working on your book. And one of the things that I think is a skill that we need to have is to be more assertive. And I'm going to be careful in saying that because what I'm not saying for all the females listening is we need to be more like men. That's not what I'm saying. I do think we need to be more assertive though. How have you seen that or how have you helped HR people develop that?

John Bernatovicz: Well, there's two fundamental items inside of, at least from my standpoint, we call them table stakes in the book of doing HR like a boss. First off, you have to take ownership. And I believe people that take ownership are instinctually assertive because it's something you have to do. If you own your favorite car or if you bought a house, you have a protection of that. It's something that it means something to you. Taking on an ownership mindset is really important in treating your job like it's a business. I do know both working in corporate someone else as well as o There's a slightly

differ all there is to it and try your mind to look at you a business and hopefully provides a platform for your autonomy. That's that we talk about in the book, and in my presentation on podcast about love, can we talk about love at work? And it's kind of, you know, funny when I asked, I got to interview over 100 people to potentially be in the book and get ideas from great HR professionals. And when I brought up the word love, they brought their own stories about, okay, you got to be careful about that. Because if I had to give you my worst story about being in HR, it has to do with what's next to love, or comes with love, all these issues that can exist. And I meant, no, just loving what you do, and remembering why you got into it for people, and helping them, and having them achieve their dreams, which is a big thing that I believe in 100%. Let's reframe. You know, the compliance stuff, the things we've got to do, leveraging technology, all that stuff is important. But if you can help somebody achieve a dream by doing something that they weren't able to do because work got in the way, you can make a huge difference. In order to do that, you've got to take ownership, you've got to love it, and as a result... I think it creates more confidence. It creates more persuasion, persistence, belief in what you're doing, which then creates that level of just, I got to get this done. Whether you're a male, female, whatever way of life, it's just, it doesn't matter to me. Let's just get it done because it's the right thing to do.

Shari Simpson: You mentioned a couple when you were giving an answer, but what other misconceptions have you heard about HR that maybe business leaders think?

John Bernatovicz: so many. It's really it's like the saddest. I have a slide my presentation is like close up of Toby from the office and it always gets this laugh and a shriek at the same time. And I have to tell you, when I wrote my book, and it clearly has HR as the very first two letters of the title. I had so many non HR professionals looking at it I'm not going to read that book. I hate HR. I'm like, Okay, well, why do you hate HR? I had individual examples and experiences of. And really, what really another motivation to write the book, when I first started doing this presentation called HR Like a Boss, well before I wrote the book, I asked that question. Why do people hate HR? And the room, I mean, I could have spent the whole time for one hour letting the room share their stories, the things that people dislike. And I truly feel like, They frame themselves as you're relegated to that. You're compliance police. You don't let me do what I want to do in my business because you're trying to stop me from doing A, B and C. And an HR has to understand the balance between staying in compliance and driving results for the business. There are definitely some things you can't do. But we also have to recognize what the business is looking for and make sure those business leaders, sometimes they're not reasonable. They're doing things that they shouldn't and that HR professional should stand their ground. If it's not the right fit for them, they should move on. But unfortunately, there's a misperception or maybe it's not a misperception. It's just reality of what HR does that has earned them that reputation outside of it. That's why I

really, when I think about defining HR like a boss, it's a business leader first that uses the platform of HR to connect their people to the purpose of their business. If you frame what you do that way, as opposed to when you go to a dinner party and say, oh, I'm in HR, I'm not going to talk to you. You might know my HR manager and then all of a sudden I'm going to get in trouble.

Shari Simpson: How does HR continue to influence the organization? And I want to ask that question from two different perspectives. So if you are an HR professional who is approaching things from that strategic mindset, you can influence in one way. If you are maybe earlier in your career, or maybe you're in HR department of one, or maybe that there's a couple layers below you, your influence sometimes is a little harder to accomplish. What tips or things have you seen HR professionals do to really become strategic influencers in their organizations?

John Bernatovicz: I would say two main things. Number one, really, really, really, without any hesitation, put your people first. Pour your heart into your employees, get to know them, build relationships, understand what makes them tick. That's the first thing. Second thing, and I'll say one, one A, is to make sure that you're delivering results for your business. You're getting paid by your organization to do a job. And you're, unfortunately, in that indirect expense that's really not a profit center for an organization. So you have to add value in a way that's driving results. And if we do those two things really well, then what if we could make a difference in our community? We've got resources, people that are engaged, a business that's making money. Then you can attack societal issues. That last point is really the thing that I opened was an eye-opening experience for me when I wrote down the idea of doing HR like a boss and the steps to get there. And that purposeful commitment of an organization when you get people together. And there are companies out there that are doing a phenomenal job with that. And it is possible to do it. And that's how I think you make that influence. To me, simple as the start with one employee, get to know them, what makes them tick, how can you help them get to their achieving their personal professional goals and then try it again and then try it again and make sure while you're doing it, you're driving results for your business.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. Okay. I want to, I want to put the ownership on HR. What are the things that we're doing wrong that we need to change?

John Bernatovicz: Well, I mean, the data just points to the fact that Gallup 12 came out the lowest engagement scores ever. So how do we fix that? And it goes back to what I mentioned earlier. And I just think of, okay, Imagine not liking what you do, not enjoying the experience, feeling like your organization doesn't care about you, not generally being satisfied. That's a terrible way to live your life. And a lot, I mean, millions and millions of people are feeling that way. And I think HR and the CEO have the best chance to change that. And I think ultimately, from that standpoint, we just have to figure out creative ways inside of our organization to improve engagement, improve showing that we care for our people. And it goes back to what I mentioned.

Just don't be afraid to build a relationship with someone. Obviously, not too much of a relationship. It's got to have that balance. But when I say building a relationship, make them feel like you're a human being. C. Brown uses the put the human back in human resources phrase, and you see that all the time. And it sounds cliché-ish, but I think people don't do a good enough job of that. And they're so afraid. I can't get close to you, Shari, because I may need to put you on a performance improvement plan or I may need to let you go because of whatever, something. Well, I think to myself, it'd be a much easier conversation for me to put you on a performance evaluation if I knew you and I understood what made you tick. We could have a more real conversation as opposed to one that's very transactional. So I would say first suggestion is build relationships. Build relationships with your people. Build relationships with people on your team. Make them know who you are and that you're a real human being.

Shari Simpson: I once had a situation with an employee who had been on a performance improvement plan, was not succeeding, had been offered a severance package. And I remember sitting down with him and he was like, I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to do. I feel like I don't necessarily deserve this. Am I supposed to take this plan or not? What's your advice? And I'm sure all those listening are like, oh my gosh, like he asked you the advice question, right? Like we all kind of avoid giving that kind of advice because we don't want to be held liable, right? And I just got really honest with him and I said, hey, listen, we don't seem like we're the right fit for you anymore. You don't seem like you're enjoying working here anymore. And I can't tell you legally sign the severance agreement. You need to follow legal advice on that one, but it's not a bad deal. It was just a really human conversation and he came afterwards and said, you know what? You're the only HR leader who's ever talked to me like a human being. He's like, you obviously knew the things that you needed to be careful about. He's like, but I felt like you heard me and listened to me and gave me something to think about. And me even telling you this, I'm getting goosebumps because That's where employees want. They want that. They want that authentic relationship. Human to human, right? Bringing the human back to human resources. It's so important.

John Bernatovicz: Yeah, no, great story. Great example. It's just one of those things where I think, if you're if you're genuine, and you're real, and you're honest, and you understand the role that you sit in, that's one of the challenges like in HR. That's why the SHRM conference like this and building your community and network is so important, because there's conversations you have with your people, you can't tell anybody else about within your organization, but you can nondescript describe that. And it might likely your spouse gets kind of sick of it or best friends. Like, okay, stop telling me these words. I don't know what to tell you for sure. But if you do the right thing, I guess it's simple. I mean, it sounds like so simple, but just what's the right thing to do? How would you want to be treated, Shari, in that same situation if you're put there? Do you want a robot sitting there saying, reading off all the lines, saying I can't give

you advice, go see your attorney? Okay, that's maybe part of framing it, but it's to your example of just being genuine and real. This doesn't seem like the right fit. And maybe I'm reading it wrong. Maybe I'm reading that wrong. And eventually they have to come to their own conclusion. And I think another major thing is in our society, I feel like we always fear the outlier. And in the squeaky wheel in our society gets the oil and the attention. Yeah. The most extreme of all extremes. You get to see things that people are waving. All right. You get extreme of all extremes. And that's what gets attention. Yeah. And as a result, HR is concerned about the one time that I said the wrong thing, and then we got sued, as opposed to the thousands of other times you said the right thing, or were just genuine. And I don't think you can prevent those things from happening. I really don't. There are bad people in the world, and that's just what it is. Or there are ones that are outliers that you can't prevent those issues from happening. And I hate to lead with fear. I think leading with fear is a dangerous thing to do, and not being who you are.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. You mentioned earlier the partnership between Human Resources and the CEO. And the reason I bring that up, because I'm curious from your perspective and the people you've talked to, who owns culture in your organization?

John Bernatovicz: Well, the people do. the people of your company own your culture. I think your CEO and your HR department have the greatest chance to frame that, create accountability around its structure, how you promote it, advertise it, make it part of your hiring and recognition and firing process, because those are all real things within your culture. But I think I get asked that question a number of times, because fortunately, my firm has been recognized as a top employer for high performers. We just, as an organization, made an application for a local recognition with that. We hope, fingers crossed, we get selected. But it's one of those things where it's the people that make that. And if you try to fabricate a culture, you try to make it something that's not organic, people will sniff it out. And to me, from an HR standpoint, and a CEO, both very important, you have to stand behind it. You just can't talk the talk, you have to walk the walk. When you have something plastered all over your entrance or on your website, and your employees go there and they're like, that's not how this works. it's not gonna fly. But if it comes from a brown swell up and they get that, we have a core value at our company of live by the golden rule. And we hire people that feel that way. And fortunately, when we get that right most times and when we don't, I was just having this conversation with my team not too long ago, it just surfaces itself out. This is not the right fit, just like the conversation you had before. I think the people protect it. That's what you want. And ultimately, HR needs to create accountability and structure and advertisement and marketing of it. I use that word on purpose and really use it as a guide for you, like a simple guide of like, here's what works here. Here's what we accept. Here's what we don't accept. These are rules of engagement and follow along. If you do great, we'll recognize you. If you don't, we'll talk about it.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. As somebody who is a business owner and somebody who is super passionate about HR, what advice do you have for HR leaders specifically on how they can be the best leaders for their HR teams?

John Bernatovicz: Well, I think it goes back to that idea of leading by example and driving first and foremost priorities is advocating for your people. And that's that's HR needs to do that. I get asked that question all the time. Which one should you put first? Really, you should put your people first. It's just you need to be real and genuine about it. But it's a really close second of the business. And maybe some compare it. I have two kids. Do I have a favorite child? Well, no, of course I don't. I love both Will and Mallory the same. But we have different relationships and different experiences with each other. And I think as a leader in human resources, you have to elevate your business acumen. I think that's a primary Suggestion I would make, because the perception of human resources is hire, fire, compliance, police. Toby from the office, sorry, that's what it is. Let's change it to be a business leader first and lead by example in that regard.

Shari Simpson: I love that. I'm going to ask a question that we've never talked about before, but it just clicked for me. Did you name your company after your kids?

John Bernatovicz: I did. Yes. I love that. Yeah. A very, it was one of those wonderful mistakes in my life. I never will forget it. My daughter had been born. I was thinking of going through a work transition. I was a partner in a firm. Long story short, I literally was holding my son. It's probably not even, well, he was two years old because my daughter and him are two years apart, a little bit older than two years old. And I'm holding him, rocking him in his room. It's dark. And all of a sudden I had this Will and Mallory put them together. There's a word for that, a fancy word. I can't remember what it is. You can Google it if you're out there. And I'm like, Willary. And I immediately went to GoDaddy. And I clicked in the domain and it was available and I bought it. Like within 90 seconds, all that happened. And I'm like, I'm just going to use that. And it's kind of funny about a few months later, I hired an outside marketing agency. I asked a few friends and I said, I want to start in this firm. I have these options of names and boom, boom, boom. And Willery came up. What does that one mean? And so I named it Will and picked that one. And it was like unanimous. And that's how Willery

Shari Simpson: I love it. And it's personal. It aligns so much with who you are and what you're passionate about. So I absolutely love that. You know, as we wrap up our discussion, I was hoping we could end on how do we help our community stay passionate and motivated about HR? Because so many times we're in roles where Not only are we taking on the emotional burden of our employees, right? But we're also dealing with the strategic things we have to do. It's a lot. It's a lot for any one person or any one group to wrap their head around. How do we stay excited? How do we take what the feeling we have right now at Sherm on the Sherm floor and like we're all excited now, but we all

know we're going to go back to our offices and it's almost like we're walking back into a gray cloud sometimes.

John Bernatovicz: Well, I think that's real. This is not real work right here, what we're doing today. It's a lot of learning. It's a lot of fun. And so the vendors are doing a great job of it being enjoyed. But you're right. We've got to go back and do our job at a high level. And I think ultimately, the best way to do that is to take away the things that you want to prioritize and really simplify it down. What's most important for me? You can't leave here and say, I'm going to do 19 things because you're going to end up doing none of them. Or maybe you do 19 things below average. Pick one or two things to really focus your time and attention on. And then Continue to use your network. Continue to build those relationships. You probably made a new friend at Sherm24 or you met a thought leader or saw a speaker. Connect with them on LinkedIn and create that fellowship with them so that when you need that phone a friend, you can, you can call them and reach out to them because you know, you know, within a day, a week, a month, you're going to get into a situation where you're like, Oh no. And I'll say, what would Steve do in this situation? I'm going to reach out and just have some fellowship because it's hard to be on that Island by yourself. It's hard. And that's why the community, that's why I feel like Sherm has such a great organization because it creates the platform for people to continue and build those relationships and learn while you're doing it.

Shari Simpson: Well, and I've met so many people that I've had on the podcast through activities like this. So I could not agree more.

John Bernatovicz: Absolutely. And I'm so thankful to have your friendship as a fellow podcaster and thought leader and speaker. And I am super excited for you. This is so cool. You should all see this setup that Shari has here. It's like badass mixtape kind of stuff. And thank you so much for having me on the show and continued success at churn point for Thanks again, john.

Shari Simpson: I hope you enjoyed today's episode.

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