HR Mixtape: Episode with Shari Simpson featuring Dr. David Cohen, Founder and Senior Consultant of DS Cohen and Associates

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 Dr. David Cohen, founder and senior consultant of DS Cohen and Associates. David is dedicated to building organizations capable of sustainable growth through strategic leadership. His expertise lies in aligning culture with organizational effectiveness and performance. David, thank you so much for coming back on the podcast and having this amazing chat that we're gonna have. I appreciate the opportunity to do it. I really do. So I know that you recently released another book.

David Cohen:

Yeah. Maybe you can start there to share a little bit about that.

Shari Simpson:

Sure, the book's called Selecting the Best, Fostering a Workplace Driven by Values for Lasting Success. It's been out about a month, a little over a month, and it really has two parts to it. It's based on a case study I did in Corpus Christi, Texas, with a plant that was really a greenfield site, starting from scratch. So we worked with the new leadership to identify what the values were gonna be, what the culture was gonna be like, And then I trained them to hire people when they needed to hire people, which took about a year to be able to hire them right. And I was even surprised by the results, because in

the first round, they figured they'd have to hire 100 people. So I know they had to hire 95. So they said they'd hire 100, because they knew people wouldn't bug out. So they offered it to 102, but 101 took the job. Wow, because when people are asked why you take the job, they love the interview. They love that they were being talked about them and not some crazy stuff like what do you like and where you're going to be in five years and all that really conversation about how they act on the job. So they like that. And But unfortunately, the company that owned it in Italy went bankrupt, and it went into receivership, so the plant didn't continue being built. However, it was salvaged by a consortium from Taiwan and Mexico, and they started rebuilding it. So they said, let's bring back our best employees. Well, some of those employees moved away from Corpus Christi. One, in fact, moved to Seattle, Washington, a much different place than Corpus Christi. And he came back on his own bill for a 25% cut in salary. It turned out about 10 came back at least a 10% cut in salary. And when I asked them why, they said, because I never worked in a place where leadership not only had your back, but they were working right beside you. And every decision they made, even if it was a decision that wasn't going to be popular, or wasn't going to get them things done as fast as it should be, or they thought it could be, it was always a decision based on the values. And they said, I've never worked here like that before. I wanted to come back. Then they came back. And that's why I say, if you hire based on values, you get people that are excited about working there. They have a great employee experience and retention rates go way up, innovation and productivity go up. So there is a correlation.

Shari Simpson:
Yeah, for sure. And I think that kind of ties into the conversation that honestly that I wanted to have today around agile leadership. And what does that practically mean for HR teams today? And I guess how does it look different than some of like the traditional leadership models that we've been taught in the past?

David Cohen:
Well, if we go way back to when I started consulting in the dark ages, you would say that Leaders weren't supposed to have a sense of humor, and they

were never supposed to show emotion. They shouldn't show that side of them. You weren't strong. Now it's a 180. Now it's about humility and it's about showing, admitting that you'd failed at something and you'll learn from it. Cause that's true. Nobody ever learned anything from success. They learn more from the failures than the success of it. So I think the leadership has evolved with that. It is a certain amount of emotional intelligence that has come a long way that people realize that we're more complete human beings and that we have to adjust. Um, It doesn't mean leaders are giving up on their goals, and it doesn't mean leaders aren't giving up on their passion. It means that they're smart enough now to say, okay, if this isn't getting us where we want to go, what is? And let's listen to different points of view. And I think the best leader is one who might have an idea, isn't ready to take action yet, but ask people around him or her, what are you thinking? And question them why they're thinking that to understand it, to be able to formulate a better answer than maybe they were originally thinking. And also engage people more that way. So I think it's an important part of that.

Shari Simpson:

How do we get HR teams to think in that Agile mindset? And the reason I ask this, even if I'm back on my own, I stepped into roles where I was expected to deliver the whole product, the bow on it, perfect, ready to go, right? There wasn't that iterative process that we actually see in Agile methodology, which we know works, but sometimes it's hard, you know, teams to kind of shift that mindset to think about iteration and failure and growth in that kind of way. How do we start to make that?

David Cohen:

Well, I think one of the first things is people pay attention to what you reward. They pay attention to what you pay attention to. It's like a child pays attention to what the parents do. Same thing, they're paying attention because you as a leader in HR control their success, so to speak, control their performance review. Will they get an advancement? Will they get a bonus, et cetera? Wouldn't it be nice if somebody in HR, some leader can stand up to somebody and say, you know, I think it's really great you failed at that the other day because we can learn from it, move this so far ahead. and celebrate the

failure, but on the condition that the learning is shared with everybody. See, it's not the fact that I shared because it's corporate knowledge thing. And if we can spread the corporate knowledge and not hold on to it, but unfortunately with organizations, I won't mention any names, big name consulting firms that come in and millions of dollars in the interview employees. And the only way they can get a return on investment is firing you.

Shari Simpson:
It's like an office space.

David Cohen:
Yeah, that's what it is. And I won't mention the names of the companies or up in a way. Uh, the reality is simple is the, how do I put this? I had a friend of mine at one of the major banks that I was working at. We brought a team together saying one of these companies is coming in to interview us. you know nothing about anything except this one specialty. Because if you're the only one who knows that specialty, they can't let you go. So even though you know better than anybody else the other stuff, just talk about the one specialty. If we can get people to get past that and say, what is it that you contribute holistically? I think it'd be a whole lot better. But unfortunately, that's gonna take a lot of the outside influences are gonna have to change.

Shari Simpson:
Well, and what a waste of money for an organization if you have leadership inside approaching your employees like, hey, only say this. They're not going to get their value out of it. But you're right. If the mandate is, hey, we want you to reduce costs, that's going to involve...

David Cohen:
And he wanted them to keep their job. He didn't want them to lose their job. So he protected them, not the company.

Shari Simpson:
Yeah. Yeah. You know, as you think about HR coaching, training and development. And I'm thinking specifically in that leadership development. So

you think your middle, your middle managers, your directors, how do they think about training, agile thinking?

David Cohen:
That's a great question. It's really interesting. It's, I was working recently with a firm that's on the verge of being able to move for the first time some entry level people into supervisory roles, but they knew they weren't ready from a management point of view, from even a knowledge point of view of like policy. So they put together a program, which I think was brilliant, is they asked put together a series of programs, one's on how do you get people motivated more? How do you hire better? How do you roll this up that first line supervisors do? And they're having the senior executive team teach the course, not me. to teach them, and when I did the training of the senior leadership team, that's share the mistakes you made, be you made. because not every hire you made worked and not everybody you try to help develop, developed. And there's a difference between a development conversation and a, you know, putting somebody on a performance improvement plan. You have to know to draw the line at some point and talk about that. What, you know, what is it? So you can, they can draw and know it's safe because you did it. Because they just don't want to be able to say, you know, my boss wants me to do this, I gotta do this. There's more than one way to get there. And I might not have the right answer at this time. You know your staff better. So get to know your staff. Do you know your staff who they are? Not what they do, but who they are?

Shari Simpson:
Yeah.

David Cohen:
And a lot of managers don't know that. And if they don't know that, they've taken the human factor out. So who are you? Are you going through struggle? So many in your family have cancer. Are your kids struggling at school? Are your kids the outstanding athlete? Is your wife or husband doing something somewhere else that has just gotten a big recognition or reward? Get to know them as people. what do they aspire to? Because your job, when your job

defines you, you're limited. So as a manager, you have to know more about it. I was working with a company in Calgary that is owned by an investment firm who decided to cut staff, decided to make it lean and mean. But before that, they were very agile, they were very creative, they were very into staff. The biggest complaint I got in focus groups was, Well, they've cut people, they expect us to do more with less. I don't have time on Monday morning to come in and give everybody donuts, share coffee for 15 minutes and all the weekend wasn't where their minds at. And I realized by knowing that I could support them. I can give them the resources they need. If it was emotional, they needed it. But now I can't do that. And people are resigned because I'm not caring about them, but they'll stay with you if you care.

Shari Simpson:
Yeah. It made me think about a scenario that I was talking to somebody about the other day is when you get a new leader, let's say you've been in an organization, you get a new leader. Often that leader doesn't go back and review your resume. to see what your graphic experience is. They only know you've been in your current job. And it's much harder to you to get to know all the skills that person can actually bring to the table.

David Cohen:
Yeah, I just wrote a LinkedIn article on the whole idea of promoting from within versus hiring somebody at the CEO level from the way out. And the corn thrower research and others, fascinating. Those promoted from within, far outlast those that are brought in from the outside. Those brought in from outside usually leave within 24 months and not very successful. Those brought in from outside have a better return on the inside, have a better return on investment, and last a lot longer because they know the cult. They know, exactly, they know more than job description. They know the people, they know the culture. And somebody from the outside, you know, the worst thing somebody comes in the new job is, well, when we were at so and so, this is the way we did. But those new CEOs come in thinking they were hired as the shining star CEO because of what they did the other place. So that's what they talk about. They lose it.

Shari Simpson:

Yeah. Yeah. When you think about Agile leadership from a metrics perspective. How can HR measure that making this change is actually having a bottom line impact on organizations?

David Cohen:

That's a hard one. I'm not sure. You know, what are you trying to measure? Why are you trying to measure it? You know, what's the, you know, what's the anticipated impact? So if you can answer those questions, you probably put some sort of a rubric together to figure it out. But, you know, I'm not sure. Leadership's so hard to define to be in with, because it's not an abstract, it's not an intangible. it's, you know, people's behaviors are there, then you feel them. But the problem is, is that unless you know what they are, and know what to expect, then you can't measure it. So I can't answer that question.

Shari Simpson:

I think you're the first person who's ever given me an honest answer about a tough question like that.

David Cohen:

You can't answer it. I can BS you with some academic stuff. Hang on, let me look at my iPhone under chat GPT and give you an answer. But that's not going to help you.

Shari Simpson:

Yeah, you're so right that it's in terms of the organization and the business objectives and all those kinds of things. As you've worked with, you know, lots of different organizations, what are some of the leadership skills that you think are the most important to get for table six?

David Cohen:

I think living your values and speaking to your passion. I think if they exemplify their values, especially under tough times, if they hold people accountable and fire them for a violation of values, even if they're their best employee financially, it sends a clear message to the organization. I've seen it happen. CEOs are always, oh, I can't do that. I said, I'll tell you what. do it. And I almost

guarantee you that the new person's results are going to exceed them. Because they're so happy. He got rid of that pain in the neck. Yeah, now they're cooperating. Now they're coming back to you. So I think that's a big thing. Live your values, live your passion. And I think if you're new in the organization, Never talk about your past organization. And before you come in, find out what the behaviors that made the organization coming into successful. They might've moved away from them, but find out what originally made them successful and have a back to the future exercise to bring them back. People will love you.

Shari Simpson:
Such a good idea, and such a good challenge for the HR community, that concept of firing your best producing person if they're not living your values, because ultimately, that actually is holding your business back.

David Cohen:
That's holding everybody back.

Shari Simpson:
Yeah. There's a great Ted Lasso episode where they benched a star player. Right. And it's the same concept. We get a positive impact after that.

David Cohen:
Walton from UCLA benched Kareem because he wore facial hair and the rule was no facial hair. He benched him. The best player, you bench him. Why? He didn't follow the rules. They still won, right? So, you know, and everybody learned a lesson from that. I mean it. This is, you know, we have a certain discipline on our team. And even if you're our superstars scoring 50 points a game, You're not going to play if you don't go by our rules. And over and over again, you hear that about in sports teams, anyhow, of the person getting benched because they didn't come to practice, did something wrong, and the team still won.

Shari Simpson:
Yes. When it comes to setting clear expectations and holding people accountable to that, every leader that I've ever worked with that has done that, Super successful.

David Cohen:
Yeah, I agree with you. And the team members feel supported even when they get in trouble. Because they're like, well, I chose to not follow the rules. So like, I can't really be mad that I got a consequence when it was so clear here was the line. It just makes for amazing.

Shari Simpson:
But it only helps in the white tradition. That leader sets that line out clearly. It's not a moving target for some. And for others, it is a moving target.

David Cohen:
Yeah. You know, as we kind of wrap our conversation, you look ahead to some of the evolving trends or insights around like being agile in leadership. What do you think HR should really be paying attention to right now?

David Cohen:
Well, it's not on topic, but HR, first of all, should have the discipline not to jump feet first into AI. They should realize that it's in its infancy. And there are many, many, many, many issues with it that haven't even been discovered yet. But I think HR has to pay attention to the fact that people come to work for a certain reason, and assuming they come to work for the way they used to come to work, or why they work, has changed. And I don't know, it's just being the next generation, I think that Gen X, Gen Y, Gen Z, have all come to certain realizations since pandemic. There's more to life than just making a dollar. And there's more than life than pleasing your boss. And they've come to realize when you die, You can get 50 hours a day to work. You can have everybody at work love you. Retire 10 years later, you pass away. And the only people that are gonna be your family, maybe.

Shari Simpson:
Yeah.

David Cohen:

Right? So what's more important about life? And then what do I do to maintain this wellness about who I am and where I'm going? I think they gotta pay more attention to that.

Shari Simpson:

That's good advice. David, as always, it was great to have you.

David Cohen:

My pleasure to be here. I love it. Invite me back anytime.

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.