

HR Mixtape: Episode with Shari Simpson and Tracy Sponenberg, Founder and Chief People Officer at Tracy Sponenberg LLC

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 Sponenberg, founder and chief people officer at Tracy Sponenberg LLC. Tracy is formerly the chief people officer at the Granite Group, where she led transformative initiatives, including technology advancements and the evolution of the HR department into a celebrated people team. Tracy, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.

Tracy Sponenberg:

Thanks for having me, Shari. I'm thrilled to be here.

Shari Simpson:

So I want to talk about the deskless or frontline worker. And I think so often they are overlooked in our HR conversations. Why do you think that is right now?

Tracy Sponenberg:

Well, it's not in my conversations because this is where I dedicate my time. I just left the corporate world about a year ago and I spent probably about 90%, 95% of my 30-year career in companies with deskless workers. I think we tend to design our processes, design our procedures, design our

communications around somebody who's sitting at a desk all day. Now, some certainly companies have cracked that code, but at least in companies I've worked in, you know, we tend to send out an email and call it a day, right? And that doesn't necessarily work for somebody who is on their feet all day and who either isn't attached to their phone or who can't be attached to their phone and who certainly isn't sitting at a desk.

Shari Simpson:

How do we make that transition to think frontline worker first? And I think it's probably some of the same transition that we've had to make in other places where we've had to think of remote first. I think it's the same transition with our minds, we just have to think about it differently. And I'll add a caveat to that. Because when I have worked with frontline workers in the past, and we as HR have been sitting around having those conversations about things like engagement, I feel like it always ends up going down this road of just very silly, very like fake enjoyment, those kinds of activities that we look at rather than thinking more strategically about how you actually support a frontline employee.

Tracy Sponenberg:

I don't actually think about engagement so much as I think about the overall employee experience, right? And one of the things we did at my last job and certainly that I do with my clients is we wrap everything around the employee experience. So from before you think about becoming a candidate, all the way to way past the time you leave. What are those moments that matter along that life cycle? And those look different, potentially, depending on how you work. So we take a lot of cues from marketing and look at personas and look at how we communicate. And we take an omni-channel approach and communicate broadly and widely and make sure that we're hitting all segments of the workforce. Traditionally, in companies I've worked in, truck drivers were the hardest because they're on the road all day. And they were the hardest to reach, the hardest to get a message across, the hardest to get time with to listen to. So we developed, my former CEO developed something called the truck driver test, which was, that's how we knew when it was communicated, when you could talk to a truck driver, and they knew what

was going on. And that was a whole mix of you know, the executives, those of us in the executive team doing our job, the people team doing their job, and more particularly, most importantly, the managers, the individual location managers making sure that they're communicating.

Shari Simpson:

What were some creative ways that you took to communicate to that population?

Tracy Sponenberg:

You know, honestly, some of the most creative were some of the most old school. So when it came time to make it really important things, particularly the people team had to do, we'd send mailings home. We'd target spouses when we knew there were spouses because the historically the population that I work with last time was 80 plus percent male. And historically, a lot of their spouses were handling things like benefits. So we would, you know, invite them into the conversation. I also spent an awful lot of time out on the road visiting the locations. That was the highest and best use of my time and listening and learning to everybody who's out in different locations across the place because we had one company culture, but we also had 60 individual location cultures and we had to make sure that they were tying into the broader culture.

Shari Simpson:

How have you helped leadership understand that the experience that the frontline employees might be having can be wildly different than those that are inside the office, you know, working behind a desk, so that they really understand the dynamics of their organization and how employee experience is going to look different for those different groups?

Tracy Sponenberg:

One of the things we did at my last company with the executives, and this is something I highly encourage anybody to do, is we had them work in our central distribution facility, sometimes for a day, sometimes for a few days. And I remember when I first started at the company, it was something I

wanted to do, not something that I had to do. But I remember asking the head of the location, what time should I be there? He's like, well, we start at five, but you don't have to be there at five. I'm like, I'll be there at five. And they had me doing things that were really easy. And I was like, no, put me on what a new you do a new hire, like what a new hire would do. Okay. And so I did, I unloaded giant units, air conditioning, heating units, right. And I learned to wrap them. And I learned everything in a day. Eight years later, seven or eight years later, And of course I had been to the place in between and developed relationships, but we were talking about a new person coming in, a new executive coming in and doing that. And they're like, yeah, they did the same thing that you did. Remember when you did that? That was years later. So the impact of an executive, not just spending time, but spending time learning and doing what their frontline people do is really powerful, really powerful.

Shari Simpson:

How have you thought about flexibility different for this group? And I've had conversations before where we've talked about things like shift swapping and, you know, variety in their job. I think there's many more levers we can pull when it comes to flexibility and thinking with a flexibility mindset with this group. What are some of the tactics that you've seen that have been successful?

Tracy Sponenberg:

Yeah, I mean, I think we look at flexibility, it's not just the time flexibility, it's the role flexibility, potentially location flexibility. So, again, it goes back to the individual and, you know, wrapping things around their experience and their individual experience. Flexibility looks completely different to me than looks completely different to you, and certainly looks completely different to people working on the front lines. Some people might be happy working 10 hours a day, five days a week, and might be super motivated and productive. And some people might need something different or a different location. So I think it comes down, you can't just say, here's the flexibility we have. You have to have those individual locations. For somebody, it might mean coaching a kid's game. For somebody else, it might mean going home at noon to take their pets out. For somebody else, it might mean working the overnight shift so

they can take care of their kids. So it means many different things. But the one thing that I do know that is that we should be talking about flexibility more than we talk about return to office or all of those things.

Shari Simpson:

How has technology helped this population specifically? Because I know in a lot of organizations, frontline employees, you actually are depending on their own tech, not necessarily providing them tech, which is a little bit different. But we still need to leverage technology to help this group. How have you tackled that?

Tracy Sponenberg:

So, I looked at a number of different AI-focused solutions before I left my last role, and I have clients looking at different AI solutions as well, because AI enables us to do things that we really just couldn't do before. But the thing that tends to work with this population, I found, is anything that can automate over text. So while, you know, drivers and while folks in the warehouse may not have a computer on them, they're probably going to have a phone. So things like chatbots or helpdesks where you can text a question like, hey, how much PTO do I have left? Rather than picking up the phone or waiting for a break, anything to make it quick and easy and seamless and ideally in one platform or in a platform they're already using regularly and ideally mobile based, that's going to go a long way toward making that a seamless experience.

Shari Simpson:

What do you say to the leader listening who's like, yeah, that sounds great, but our employees for safety reasons can't have their phones on them during the day at work, they're locked in their lockers. How do you tackle some of those policies?

Tracy Sponenberg:

Yeah, I just actually had that conversation with somebody. And the first question I ask is, okay, is that really true? Can they really not have a phone or do you just not want them to have a phone? Because there are real reasons

why somebody's school or kids or parents might need to get a hold of somebody. So that's number one. And in the limited situations where people actually can't have a phone in a location, I think then we're back to some of the same challenges. However, on a break or those, I encourage leaders to give people 10 minutes out of the workday to deal with maybe their personal business, sure, but certainly their work business that they have to do. You don't want them having to do a micro-learning course or check their company email while they're at home. In a lot of cases, they can't.

Tracy Sponenberg:

And that lends itself to being really strategic about your production expectations and how you're staffing to make sure you can build in some of that time because you're absolutely right. There's work communications that revolve around technology now, no matter what kind of role you're in.

Shari Simpson:

How has it helped people think about being more creative in this space? I think of some of the things that we've talked about from the, you know, remote work perspective around burnout, those types of things. Burnout happens here, too. It's not just exclusive to that population. How is it different in how we're approaching it here? Or is it the same and we're using the same tools, just activating them differently?

Tracy Sponenberg:

You know, I think that there's a I don't know that there's a difference in burnout overall. There's certainly a difference in the individual experience and what that looks like if you're sitting in an office versus what it looks like if you're in a warehouse environment. I think it might be harder to spot in a warehouse environment, and I've certainly seen a number of people go through it and certainly a number of people deny it, including myself, although I wasn't working in a warehouse environment. Education, everything that, you know, I like to say everything starts with education. You know, my own experience with burnout, I had no idea what I was going through until I read an article and I'm supposed to know the stuff and I've been working in HR for decades, right? And if I didn't know, what about my team? What about the

company? What about the frontline employees? And so I think educating, talking about stories, I shared my story broadly with the whole company, talked about that, and somebody may recognize it. I think we start there. and then look for signs. I think too often it shows up in a decrease in performance and it certainly did for me and it certainly does. And I think too often we tend to dismiss that as solely a decrease in performance.

Shari Simpson:

For sure. And you brought up a good point that made me think about how you're communicating and supporting employees. And you talked about sharing your own story. How does training evolve for the managers of this group? Have you found that there's specific things that are more important to lean into in your manager training for this group?

Tracy Sponenberg:

When I first started my last company, it was very much a traditional HR department where HR was doing everything. Everybody was sent to HR, you know, very old school. But that's the way it was. And that's the way that I grew up. And that's how I practiced for years and years. And I evolved along with helping the department and the company evolve a little bit to do that. And along with that came, you know, helping train some managers with how to handle these day-to-day questions because people were going to them. People shouldn't be sent to HR for a body odor issue, for example. And so that training looks different depending on the company you're in. So for us, a lot of what I did in my first couple of years there actually was going around and working with managers and coaching them individually. I spent a lot of time doing that because for that organization at that time, that was scalable to a point. It's not now, but that was scalable to a point. And that was extremely, extremely helpful.

Shari Simpson:

Well, and it's empowering your managers, right? They walk away hopefully from that conversation feeling like, oh, I don't have to go to HR for everything. Right. I have the skills I need and kind of the quote unquote backing of official language that, you know, that I can use in those conversations. As you think

about the clientele that you've worked with, what comes to mind is like maybe the top, you know, three to five things that you are consistently either surprised by or really realize there's an opportunity for us to learn more about when it comes to frontline employees.

Tracy Sponenberg:

I feel like nothing surprises me, but then something comes along pretty often and surprises me. But I'd say the biggest opportunities that we have are areas, number one, leadership. So we still, in frontline companies, and a lot of frontline companies, still promote the best X or the best Y, right? So you're great at working in the warehouse, so we're going to make you warehouse manager, even though you have no experience, and we're not going to give you any training. And so there's a huge opportunity because frontline leaders are everything to frontline folks who might not be interacting with people from corporate or people from other locations. So that's far and away the biggest opportunity. I think there's a lot of opportunity with AI. I think there's a lot of opportunity to lean into well-being and to mental health specifically. We don't talk about that enough for the frontline workforce. And there's sometimes a stigma still everywhere, but particularly in that area. And I think opening up those conversations and training managers on how to listen and how to observe, I think that's another huge opportunity. And I could go on and on and on, but I'd say those are three of the biggest.

Shari Simpson:

How have you used resources like EAP for this group? And I love to ask this question because I feel like every HR leader I've talked to has a different perspective and experience when it comes to EAP. Some of them had really great experiences, some have had not great experiences, but I seem to think about it as a great resource that doesn't actually get talked about enough. So I'm curious how you've coached people in that perspective.

Tracy Sponenberg:

I think it was pre-COVID a great resource. I've always had an EAP and if not, I've implemented them somewhere and they're often embedded with our plans or with some type of program that we buy. And so I think it's a great

basic resource. I think the problem came during COVID when there just were not enough mental health professionals. So we had the experience where people needed to access care and could not. And we're waiting days or weeks to talk to someone when in many situations that just wasn't enough. So one of the things that I've seen more of that I actually love, and we did this at my last company, is partnering with groups that have, say, peer resources. I live in New Hampshire, and we have, you know, the front line for people in the hospital who have a mental health issue is a peer would come in and do the assessment, and they're very well-trained, but not somebody who's clinical. And for a lot of people, particularly on the frontline, that works really, really well because it's less stigmatized. It's somebody who's walked through what they walked through, whether it's divorce or drug issues or general mental health. So we partnered with a company that provided that support and that can work really, really well. And then it's listening and providing those resources. But EAPs are great, but they may not be enough depending on your population.

Shari Simpson:

I love the idea of peer resources because I think you're right. It does create that stickiness to somebody. Oh, you've been through this. You've been there. You're kind of experiencing some of the same things I've been through. So there's not that judgment or that fear that like, hey, I might be talking to a therapist who has great clinical background but maybe doesn't know necessarily what it's like to live in this world. As we wrap up our conversation, I want you to think for a second about the HR person who's stepping into a role where they have a heavy frontline population that they've never handled before. Let's say they've been, you know, more remote or hybrid. What's your advice to them to be successful in that organization and bring strategy from the frontline perspective to the office?

Tracy Sponenberg:

First and foremost, do a listening tour, not going out and saying, here's what I'm going to do, here's what I'm going to change, but go out and listen and try to talk to everyone if possible, but as many people as humanly possible. That's the most impactful for sure. I mean, even more than a team, if there is a

team, that's the most impactful thing that you can do is listen to your frontline folks because they really are driving the business for the company, whatever kind of company it is. And then I would say, you know, continue to do that and build trust and trust takes time. So building trust with your frontline population and everyone, but particularly them, you're going to not only know what's going on, but you're going to be able to make better data informed decisions based on having the trust of that critical population.

Shari Simpson:

I love it. So it's great advice. And Tracy, I'm so glad we were able to sit and chat about this topic. I think it's really important for our population as HR professionals to not lose sight of this really important group.

Tracy Sponenberg:

Thank you, Shari. Thanks for having me.

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.